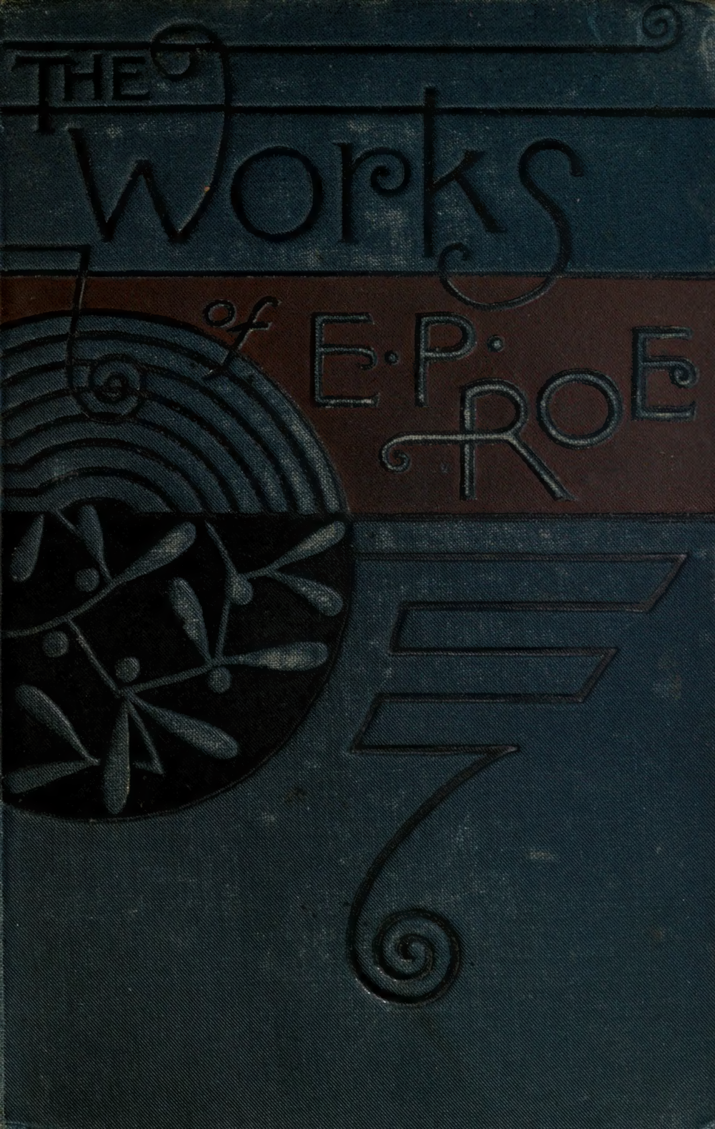

THE Works of E.P. ROE

Natures Serial Story

Edward P. Roe

E. D. Lawrence,

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NATURE'S SERIAL STORY

BY

EDWARD P. ROE

AUTHOR OF "BARRIERS BURNED AWAY," "A YOUNG GIRL'S WOOING,"
"NEAR TO NATURE'S HEART," "THE OPENING OF
A CHESTNUT BURR," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

W. HAMILTON GIBSON AND F. DIELMAN

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD, AND COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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BOSTON, MASS.

This Book

IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

To My Wife.

2054902

E. A. Lawrence,

PREFACE.

"I AM getting very tired," said a hard brain-worker to me once. "Life is beginning to drag and lose its zest." This is an experience that can scarcely happen to one who has fallen in love with Nature, or become deeply interested in any of her almost infinite manifestations. Mr. and Mrs. Clifford of my story are not wholly the creations of fancy. The aged man sketched in the following pages was as truly interested in his garden and fruit-trees after he had passed his fourscore years as any enthusiastic horticulturist in his prime, and the invalid, whose memory dwells in my heart, found a solace in flowers which no words of mine have exaggerated. If this book tends to bring others into sympathy with Nature, one of its chief missions will be fulfilled.

A love for the soil and all the pursuits of out-door life is one of the most healthful signs in a people. Our broad and diversified land affords abundant opportunity for the gratification of every rural taste, and those who form such tastes will never complain that life is losing its zest. Other pleasures pall with time and are satiated. We outgrow them. But every spring is a new revelation, every summer a fresh, original chapter of experience, and every autumn a fruition of hopes as well as of seeds and buds. Nothing can conduce more to happiness and prosperity than multitudes of rural homes. In such abodes you will not find Socialists, Nihilists, and other hare-brained reformers who seek to improve the world by ignoring nature and common-sense. Possession of the soil makes a man conservative, while he, at the same time, is conserved.

The culture of the land is no longer plodding, ox-like drudgery, nor is the farm a place of humdrum, brainless routine. Science offers her aid on every hand, and beauty, in numberless forms, is ever present to those who have eyes and hearts capable of recognizing it. The farmer has a literature of his own, which every year is growing in proportions and value. He also has time for the best literature of the world. It is his own fault if he remains akin to the clod he turns. Is it not more manly to co-work with Nature for a livelihood than to eke out a pallid, pitiful existence behind a counter, usurping some woman's place?

Nature is a good mother, after all, in our latitude. She does not coddle and over-indulge her children, but rewards their love abundantly, invigorates them if they dwell in her presence, and develops mind and muscle, heart and soul, if they obey her laws and seek to know her well. Although infinitely rich, she has not the short-sighted folly of those parents who seek to place everything in the hand of a child without cost. On the contrary she says, "See what you may win, what you may attain." Every crop is a prize to knowledge, skill, industry. Every flower is a beautiful mystery which may be solved in part; every tree is stored sunshine for the hearth, shelter from the storm, a thing of beauty while it lives, and of varied use when its life is taken. In animals, birds, insects, and vegetation we are surrounded by diversified life, and our life grows richer, more healthful and complete, as we enter into their life and comprehend it. The clouds above us are not mere reservoirs of water for prosaic use. In their light, shade, and exquisite coloring they are ever a reproach to the blindness of coarse and earthy minds.

The love of Nature is something that may be developed in every heart, and it is a love that rarely fails to purify and exalt. To many she is a cold, indifferent beauty. They see, but do not know and appreciate her, and she passes on her way as if they were nothing to her. But when wooed patiently and lovingly, she stops to smile, caress, and entertain with exhaustless diversion.

In this simple home story I have talked, perhaps, like a garrulous lover who must speak of his mistress, even though his words weary others. I console myself, however, with the thought that my text has proved the prosaic root and stem which have given being to the exquisite flowers of art that adorn these pages. In Mr. Gibson and Mr. Dielman I have had ideal associates in the work. They have poured light on a landscape that would otherwise be dull and gray.

My characters may seem shadows to others, but they have become real, or were real, to me. I meet them still in walks and drives where in fancy I had placed them before. I would not have to go very far to find types of the children introduced, but the lovers, and the majority of the others, began as shadows in the background of imagination, and took form and substance with time. Dr. Marvin, however, is a reality and a most valued friend, who has assisted me greatly in my work. Any one who has the good-fortune to meet Dr. E. A. Mearns, surgeon in the regular army, can scarcely fail to recognize in him the genial sportsman for whom the birds were "always in season." There are others to whom I am indebted, like John Burroughs, Thoreau, Baird, Brewer, and Ridgway, true lovers and interpreters of Nature. Those living stand near her queenly presence; those who have passed on are doubtless nearer still.

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W.H. GIBSON & F. DIELMAN.

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NATURE'S SERIAL STORY.

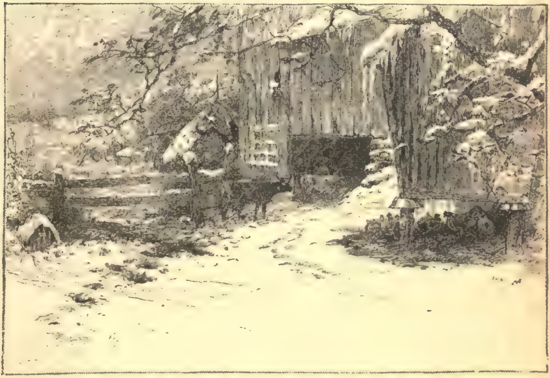
CHAPTER I.

A COUNTRY HOME.

HOW much it means — what possibilities it suggests! The one I shall describe was built not far from half a century ago, and the lapsing years have only make it more homelike. It has long ceased to be a new object — an innovation — and has become a part of the landscape, like the trees that have grown up around it. Originally painted brown, with the flight of time it has taken a grayish tinge, as if in sympathy with its venerable proprietor. It stands back from the roadway, and in summer has an air of modest seclusion. Elms, maples, and shrubbery give to the passer-by but chance glimpses of the wide veranda, which is indicated, rather than revealed, beyond the thickly clustering vines.

It is now late December, and in contrast with its leafy retirement the old homestead stands out with a sharp distinctness in the white landscape; and yet its sober hue harmonizes with the dark boles of the trees, and suggests that, like them, it is a natural growth of the soil, and quite as capable of clothing itself with foliage in the coming spring. This in a sense will be true when the greenery and blossoms of the wistaria, honeysuckle, and grape-vines appear, for their fibres and tendrils have clung to the old house so long that they may well be deemed an inseparable part of it. Even now it seems that the warmth, light, and comfort within are the sustaining influences which will carry them through the coming days of frost and storm. A tall pine-tree towers above the northern gable of the dwelling, and it is ever sighing and moaning to itself, as if it possessed some unhappy family secret which it can neither reveal nor forget. On the hither side of its shade a carriage-drive curves towards an ancient horse-block, with many a lichen growing on the under side of the weather-beaten planks and supports. From this platform, where guests have been alighting for a generation or more, the drive passes to an old-fashioned carriage-house, in which are the great family sleigh and a light and gayly painted cutter, revealing that the home is not devoid of the young life to which winter's most exhilarating pastime is so dear. A quaint corn-crib is near, its mossy posts capped with inverted tin pans much corroded by rust. These prevent prowling rats and mice from climbing up among the golden treasures. Still farther beyond are the gray old barn and stables, facing the south. Near their doors on the sunny side of the ample yard stand half a dozen ruminating cows, with possibly, between their wide-branching horns, a dim consciousness of the fields, now so white and cold, from which were cropped, in the long-past summer, far juicier morsels than now fall to their lot. Even into their sheltered nook the sun, far down in the south, throws but cold and watery gleams from a steel-colored sky, and as the northern blast eddies around the sheltering buildings the poor creatures shiver, and when their morning airing is over are glad to return to their warm, straw-littered stalls. Even the gallant and champion cock of the yard is chilled. With one foot drawn up into his fluffy feathers he stands motionless in the midst of his disconsolate harem with his eye fixed vacantly on the forbidding outlook. His dames appear neither to miss nor to invite his attentions, and their eyes, usually so bright and alert, often film in weary discontent. Nature, however, is oblivious to all the dumb protests of the barn-yard, and the cold steadily strengthens.

Away on every side stretch the angular fields, outlined by fences that are often but white, continuous mounds, and also marked by trees and shrubs that, in their earlier life, ran the gantlet of the bush-hook. Here and there the stones of the higher and more abrupt walls crop out, while the board and rail fences appear strangely dwarfed by the snow that has fallen and drifted around them. The groves and wood-crowned hills still farther away look as drearily uninviting as roofless dwellings with icy hearth-stones and smokeless chimneys. Towering above all, on the right, is Storm King mountain, its granite rocks and precipices showing darkly here and there, as if its huge white mantle were old and ragged indeed. One might well shiver at the lonely, desolate wastes lying beyond it, grim hills and early-shadowed valleys, where the half-starved fox prowls, and watches for unwary rabbits venturing from their



BARNYARD.

coverts to nibble the frozen twigs. The river, which above the Highlands broadens out into Newburgh Bay, has become a snowy plain, devoid, on this bitter day, of every sign of life. The Beacon hills, on the farther side, frown forbiddingly through the intervening northern gale, sweeping southward into the mountain gorge.

On a day like this the most ardent lover of Nature could scarcely fail to shrink from her cold, pallid face and colder breath. Our return to the home, whose ruddy firelight is seen through the frosted window-panes, will be all the more welcome because we have been shivering so long without. The grace of hospitality has been a characteristic of the master of the house for over half a century, and therefore the reader need not fear to enter, especially at this Christmas-time, when the world, as if to make amends for the churlish welcome it gave to its Divine Guest, for whom no better place was found than a stable, now throws open the door and heart in kindly feeling and unselfish impulses.

We propose to make a long visit at this old-fashioned homestead. We shall become the close friends of its inmates, and share in their family life; they will introduce us to some of their neighbors, and take us on many breezy drives and pleasant excursions, with which it is their custom to relieve their busy life; we shall take part in their rural labors, and learn from them the secret of obtaining from nature that which nourishes both soul and body; they will admit us to their confidence, and give us glimpses of that mystery of mysteries, the human heart; and we shall learn how the ceaseless story of life, with its hopes and fears, its joys and sorrows, repeats itself in the quiet seclusion of a country home as truly as in the turmoil of the city. Nor would our visit be complete did we not witness among the ripened fruits of conjugal affection the bud and blossom of that immortal flower which first opened in Eden, and which ever springs unbidden from the heart when the conditions that give it life and sustenance are present.

The hallway of this central scene of our story is wide, and extends to a small piazza in the rear. The front half of this family thoroughfare, partitioned off by sliding-doors, can thus be made into a roomy apartment. Its breezy coolness causes it to be a favorite resort on sultry days, but now it is forsaken, except that a great heater, with its ample rotundity and glowing heart, suggests to the visitor that it stands there as a representative of the host until he shall appear. Some portraits, a fine old engraving, a map of the county, and some sprays of evergreen intermingled with red berries, take away all bareness from the walls, while in a corner near the door stands a rack, formed in part by the branching antlers of a stag, on which hang fur caps and collars, warm wraps and coats, all suggesting abundant means of robbing winter of its rigor. On hooks above the sliding-doors are suspended a modern rifle and a double-barrelled shot-gun, and above these is a firelock musket that did good service in the Revolution.

The doors opening into the rear hall were pushed back, revealing a broad stairway, leading with an abrupt turn and a landing to the upper chambers. A cheerful apartment on the left of this hall was the abode of an invalid, whose life for many years disease had vainly sought to darken. There were lines of suffering on her thin, white face, and her hair, once black, was silvered; but it would seem that, in the dark, lustrous eyes of the patient woman, courage and hope had been kindled, rather than quenched, by pain. She was now reclining on a sofa, which had been wheeled near to a wood-fire glowing on the hearth of a large Franklin stove; and her dreamy, absent expression often gave place to one of passing interest as her husband, sitting opposite, read from his paper an item of news — some echo from the busy, troubled world, that seemed so remote from their seclusion and peaceful age. The venerable man appeared, however, as if he might still do his share in keeping the world busy, and also in banishing its evils. Although time had whitened his locks, it had touched kindly his stalwart frame, while his square jaw and strong features indicated a character that had met life's vicissitudes as a man should meet them. His native strength and force, however, were like the beautiful region in which he dwelt — once wild and rugged indeed, but now softened and humanized by generations of culture. Even his spectacles could not obscure the friendly and benevolent expression of his large blue eyes. It was evident that he looked at the world, as mirrored before him in the daily journal, with neither cynicism nor mere curiosity, but with a heart in sympathy with all the influences that were making it better.

The sound of a bell caused the old man to rise and assist his wife to her feet; then, with an affectionate manner, tinged with a fine courtesy of the old school, he supported her to the dining-room, placed her in a cushioned chair on his right, at the head of the table, and drew a footstool to her feet. There was a gentleness and solicitude in his bearing which indicated that her weakness was more potent than strength would have been in maintaining her ascendency.

Meanwhile the rest of the family flocked in with an alacrity which proved either that the bitter cold had sharpened their appetites, or that the old-fashioned one-o'clock dinner was a cheerful break in the monotony of the day. There was a middle-aged man, who was evidently the strong stay and staff on which the old people leaned. His wife was the housekeeper of the family, and she was emphatically the "house-mother," as the Germans phrase it. Every line of her good, but rather care-worn, face bespoke an anxious solicitude about everybody and everything except herself. It was apparent that she had inherited not a little of the "Martha" spirit, and "was careful about many things;" but her slight tendency to worry saved others a world of worriment, for she was the household providence, and her numberless little anxieties led to so much prevention of evil that there was not much left to cure. Such was her untiring attention that her thoughtless, growing children seemed cared for by the silent forces of nature. Their clothes came to them like the leaves on the trees, and her deft fingers added little ornaments that cost the wearers no more thought than did the blossoms of spring to the unconscious plants of the garden. She was as essential to her husband as the oxygen in the air, and he knew it, although demonstrating his knowledge rather quietly, perhaps. But she understood him, and enjoyed a little secret exultation over the strong man's almost ludicrous helplessness and desolation when her occasional absences suspended for a brief time their conjugal partnership. She surrounded the old people with a perpetual Indian-summer haze of kindliness, which banished all hard, bleak outlines from their late autumnal life. In brief, she was what God and nature designed woman to be — the gracious, pervading spirit, that filled the roomy house with comfort and rest. Sitting near were her eldest son and pride, a lad about thirteen years of age, and a girl who, when a baby, had looked so like a boy that her father had called her "Johnnie," a sobriquet which still clung to her. Close to the mother's side was a little embodiment of vitality, mischief, and frolic, in the form of a four-year-old boy, the dear torment of the whole house.

There remain but two others to be mentioned, and the Clifford family will be complete, as constituted at present. The first was the youngest son of the aged man at the head of the table. He had inherited his father's features, but there was a dash of recklessness blended with the manifest frankness of his expression, and in his blue eyes there was little trace of shrewd calculation or forethought. Even during the quiet midday meal they flashed with an irrepressible mirthfulness, and not one at the table escaped his aggressive nonsense. His brother, two or three years his senior, was of a very different type, and seemed somewhat overshadowed by the other's brilliancy. He had his mother's dark eyes, but they were deep and grave, and he appeared reserved and silent, even in the home circle. His bronzed features were almost rugged in their strength, but a heavy mustache gave a touch of something like manly beauty to his rather sombre face. You felt instinctively that he was one who would take life seriously — perhaps a little too seriously — and that, whether it brought him joy or sorrow, he would admit the world but charily to his confidence.

Burtis, the youngest brother, had gone through college after a sort of neck-or-nothing fashion, and had been destined for one of the learned professions; but, while his natural ability had enabled him to run the gantlet of examinations, he had evinced such an unconquerable dislike for restraint and plodding study that he had been welcomed back to the paternal acres, which were broad enough for them all. Mr. Clifford, by various means, had acquired considerable property in his day, and was not at all disappointed that his sons should prefer the primal calling to any other, since it was within his power to establish them well when they were ready for a separate domestic life. It must be admitted, however, that thus far the rural tastes of Burtis were chiefly for free out-of-door life, with its accessories of rod, gun, and horses. But Leonard, the eldest, and Webb, the second in years, were true children of the soil, in the better sense of the term. Their country home had been so replete with interest from earliest memory that they had taken root there like the trees which their father had planted. Leonard was a practical farmer, content, in a measure, to follow the traditions of the elders. Webb, on the other hand, was disposed to look past the outward aspects of Nature to her hidden moods and motives, and to take all possible advantage of his discoveries. The farm was to him a laboratory, and, with something of the spirit of the old alchemists, he read, studied, and brooded over the problem of producing the largest results at the least cost. He was by no means deficient in imagination, or even in appreciation of the beautiful side of nature, when his thoughts were directed to this phase of the outer world; but his imagination had become materialistic, and led only to an eager quest after the obscure laws of cause and effect, which might enable him to accomplish what to his plodding neighbors would seem almost miraculous. He understood that the forces with which he was dealing were well-nigh infinite; and it was his delight to study them, to combine them, and make them his servants. It was his theory that the energy in nature was like a vast motive power, over which man could throw the belt of his skill and knowledge, and so produce results commensurate with the force of which he availed himself. There was, therefore, an unfailing zest in his work, and the majority of his labors had the character of experiments, which, nevertheless, were so guided by experience that they were rarely futile or unremunerative. On themes that accorded with his tastes and pursuits he would often talk earnestly and well, but his silence and pre-occupation at other times proved that it is not best to be dominated by one idea, even though it be a large one.

CHAPTER II.

AMY WINFIELD.

THE reader may now consider himself introduced to the household with whom he is invited to sojourn. In time he will grow better acquainted with the different members of the family, as they in their several ways develop their own individuality. A remark from old Mr. Clifford indicates that another guest is expected, who, unlike ourselves, will be present in reality, not fancy, and who is destined to become a permanent inmate of the home.

"This is a bitter day," he said, "for little Amy to come to us; and yet, unless something unforeseen prevents, she will be at the station this evening."

"Don't worry about the child," Burtis responded, promptly; "I'll meet her, and am glad of an excuse to go out this horrid day. I'll wrap her up in furs like an Esquimau."

"Yes, and upset her in the drifts with your reckless driving," said good-natured Leonard. "Thunder is wild enough at any time; but of late, between the cold, high feeding, and idleness, he'll have to be broken over again: lucky if he don't break your neck in the operation. The little girl will feel strange enough, anyway, coming among people that she has never seen, and I don't intend that she shall be frightened out of her wits into the bargain by your harum-scarum ways. You'd give her the impression that we were only half-civilized. So I'll drive over for her in the family sleigh, and take Alf with me. He will be nearer her own age, and help to break the ice. If you want a lark, go out by yourself, and drive where you please, after your own break-neck style."

"Leonard is right," resumed Mr. Clifford, emphatically. "The ward committed to me by my dear old friend should be brought to her home with every mark of respect and affection by the one who has the best right to represent me. I'd go myself, were not the cold so severe; but then Leonard's ways are almost as fatherly as my own; and when his good wife there gets hold of the child she'll soon be fused into the family, in spite of the zero weather. She'll find all the cold without the door."

"I yield," said Burtis, with a careless laugh. "Len shall bring home the little chick, and put her under his wife's wing. I should probably misrepresent the family, and make a bad first impression; and as for Webb, you might as well send the undertaker for her."

"I don't think she will feel strange among us very long," said Leonard's wife. "She shall hang up her stocking to-night, like the other children, and I have some nice little knick-knacks with which to fill it. These, and the gifts which the rest of you have provided, will delight her, as they do all little people, and make her feel at once that she is part of the family."

"Maggie expresses my purpose fully," concluded Mr. Clifford. "As far as it is within our power, we should make her one of the family. In view of my friend's letters, this is the position that I desire her to sustain, and it will be the simplest and most natural relation for us all. Your mother and I will receive her as a daughter, and it is my wish that my sons should treat her as a sister from the first."

Amy Winfield, the subject of the above remarks, was the only daughter of a gentleman who had once been Mr. Clifford's most intimate friend, and also his partner in many business transactions. Mr. Winfield had long resided abroad, and there had lost the wife whom he had married rather late in life. When feeling his own end drawing near, his thoughts turned wistfully to the friend of his early manhood, and, as he recalled Mr. Clifford's rural home, he felt that he could desire no better refuge for his child. He had always written of her as his "little girl," and such she was in his fond eyes, although in fact she had seen eighteen summers. Her slight figure and girlish ways had never dispelled the illusion that she was still a child, and as such he had commended her to his friend, who had responded to the appeal as to a sacred claim, and had already decided to give her a daughter's place in his warm heart. Mr. Winfield could not have chosen a better guardian for the orphan and her property, and a knowledge of this truth had soothed the last hours of the dying man.

It struck Leonard that the muffled figure he picked up at the station and carried through the dusk and snow to the sleigh was rather tall and heavy for the child he was expecting; but he wrapped her warmly, almost beyond the possibility of speaking, or even breathing, and spoke the hearty and encouraging words which are naturally addressed to a little girl. After seeing that her trunks were safely bestowed in a large box-sledge, under the charge of black Abram, one of the farm-hands, he drove rapidly homeward, admonishing Alfred, on the way, "to be sociable." The boy, however, had burrowed so deep under the robes as to be invisible and oblivious. When Leonard was about to lift her out of the sleigh, as he had placed her in it, the young girl protested, and said,

"I fear I shall disappoint you all by being larger and older than you expect."

A moment later he was surprised to find that the "child" was as tall as his wife, who, with abounding motherly kindness, had received the girl into open arms. Scarcely less demonstrative and affectionate was the greeting of old Mr. Clifford, and the orphan felt, almost from the first, that she had found a second father.

"Why, Maggie," whispered Leonard, "the child is as tall as you are!"

"There's only the more to welcome, then," was the genial answer, and, turning to the young girl, she continued, "Come with me, my dear; I'm not going to have you frightened and bewildered with all your new relations before you can take breath. You shall unwrap in your own room, and feel from the start that you have a nook where no one can molest you or make you afraid, to which you can always retreat;" and she led the way to a snug apartment, where an air-tight stove created summer warmth. There was a caressing touch in Mrs. Leonard's assistance which the young girl felt in her very soul, for tears came into her eyes as with a deep sigh of relief she sat down on a low chair.

"I feared I should be a stranger among strangers," she murmured; "but I already feel as if I were at home."

"You are, Amy," was the prompt reply, spoken with that quiet emphasis which banishes all trace of doubt. "You are at home as truly as I am. There is nothing half-way in this house. Do you know we all thought that you were a child? I now foresee that we shall be companions, and very companionable, too, I am sure."

There was a world of grateful good-will in the dark hazel eyes which Amy lifted to the motherly face bending over her.

"And now come," pursued Mrs. Leonard; "mother Clifford, the boys, and the children are all eager to see you. You won't find much ice to break, and before the evening is over you will feel that you belong to us and we to you. Don't be afraid."

"I am not afraid any more. I was, though, on my way here. Everything looked so cold and dismal from the car windows, and the gentleman in whose care I was had little to say, though kind and attentive enough. I was left to my own thoughts, and gave way to a foolish depression; but when your husband picked me up in his strong arms, and reassured me as if I were a little girl, my feeling of desolation began to pass away. Your greeting and dear old Mr. Clifford's have banished it altogether. I felt as if my own father were blessing me in the friend who is now my guardian, and of whom I have heard so often; and, after my long winter journey among strangers, you've no idea what a refuge this warm room has already become. Oh, I know I shall be happy. I only wish that dear papa knew how well he has provided for me."

"He knows, my dear. But come, or that incorrigible Burt will be bursting upon us in his impatience, and the little mother must not be kept waiting, either. You will soon learn to love her dearly. Weak and gentle as she is, she rules us all."

"Mother's room" was, in truth, the favorite haunt of the house, and only her need of quiet kept it from being full much of the time. There was nothing bleak or repelling in the age it sheltered, and children and grandchildren gathered about the old people almost as instinctively as around their genial open fire. This momentous Christmas-eve found them all there, a committee of reception awaiting the new inmate of their home. There was an eager desire to know what Amy was like, but it was a curiosity wholly devoid of the spirit of criticism. The circumstances under which the orphan came to them would banish any such tendency in people less kindly than the Cliffords; but their home-life meant so much to them all that they were naturally solicitous concerning one who must, from the intimate relations she would sustain, take from or add much to it. Therefore it was with a flutter of no ordinary expectancy that they waited for her appearance. The only one indifferent was Leonard's youngest boy, who, astride his grandpa's cane, was trotting quietly about, unrestricted in his gambols. Alfred had thawed out since his return from the station, and was eager to take the measure of a possible playmate; but, with the shyness of a boy who is to meet a "strange girl," he sought a partial cover behind his grandfather's chair. Little "Johnnie" was flitting about impatiently, with her least mutilated doll upon her arm; while her uncle Burtis, seated on a low stool by his mother's sofa, pretended to be exceedingly jealous, and was deprecating the fact that he would now be no longer petted as her baby, since the child of her adoption must assuredly take his place. Webb, who, as usual, was somewhat apart from the family group, kept up a poor pretence of reading; and genial Leonard stood with his back to the fire, his hands clasped behind him, beaming upon all, and waiting to shine on the new-comer. Only Mr. Clifford seemed uninfluenced by the warm, bright present. He gazed fixedly into the flickering blaze, and occasionally took off his spectacles to wipe away the moisture that gathered in his eyes. His thoughts, evidently, were busy with years long past, and were following that old, tried friend who had committed to his hands so sacred a trust.

The door opened, and Mrs. Leonard led Amy forward. The latter hesitated a moment, bewildered by the number of eyes turned towards her, and the new relations into which she was entering. She proved that she was not a child by her quick, blushing consciousness of the presence of two young men, who were as yet utter strangers; and they, in turn, involuntarily gave to the slender, brown-haired girl quite a different welcome from the one they had expected to bestow upon a child. Old Mr. Clifford did not permit her embarrassment to last a moment, but, stepping hastily forward, and encircling her with his arm, he led her to his wife, who brought tears into the eyes of the motherless girl by the gentle warmth of her greeting. She monopolized her ward so long that impatient Burtis began to expostulate, and ask when his turn was coming. The young girl turned a shy, blushing face towards him, and her cheeks, mantling under the full rays of the lamp, rendered the exquisite purity of her complexion all the more apparent. He also began to feel that he was flushing absurdly, but he carried it off with his usual audacity.

"I am much embarrassed and perplexed," he said. "I was led to expect a little sister that I could romp with, and pick up and kiss; but here is a young lady that almost paralyzes me with awe."

"I'd like to see you paralyzed from any such cause just once," Leonard remarked, laughingly. "Go kiss your sister, like a little man."

The young fellow seemed to relish the ceremony exceedingly, and responsive mirthfulness gleamed for a moment in Amy's eyes. Then he dragged Webb forward, saying, "Let me introduce to you the grave and learned member of the family, to whom we all speak with bated breath. You must not expect him to get acquainted with you in any ordinary way. He will investigate you, and never rest until he has discovered all the hidden laws of your being. Now, Webb, I will support you while Amy kisses you, and then you may sit down and analyze your sensations, and perhaps cipher out a method by which a kiss can be rendered tenfold more effective."

Unmoved by his brother's raillery, Webb took the young girl's hand, and looked at her so earnestly with his dark, grave eyes, that hers drooped. "Sister Amy," he said, gently, "I was prepared to welcome you on general principles, but I now welcome you for your own sake. Rattlebrain Burt will make a good playmate, but you will come to me when you are in trouble;" and he kissed her brow.

The girl looked up with a swift, grateful glance; it seemed odd to her, even at that moment of strong and confused impressions, and with the salutes of her guardians still warm upon her cheek, that she felt a sense of rest and security never known before. "He will be my brother in very truth," was the interpretation which her heart gave to his quiet words. They all smiled, for the course of the reticent and undemonstrative young man was rather unexpected. Burtis indulged in a ringing laugh, as he said:

"Father, mother, you must both feel wonderfully relieved. Webb is to look after Amy in her hours of woe, which, of course, will be frequent in this vale of tears. He will console you, Amy, by explaining how tears are formed, and how, by a proper regard for the sequence of cause and effect, there might be more or less of them, according to your desire."

"I think I understand Webb," was her smiling answer.

"Don't imagine it. He is a perfect sphinx. Never before has he opened his mouth so widely, and only an occasion like this could have moved him. You must have unconsciously revealed a hidden law, or else he would have been as mum as an oyster."

Leonard, meanwhile, had seated himself, and was holding little Ned on his knee, his arm at the same time encircling shy, sensitive Johnnie, who was fairly trembling with excited expectancy. Ned, with his thumb in his mouth, regarded his new relative in a nonchalant manner; but to the little girl the home-world was *the* world, and the arrival in its midst of the beautiful lady never seen before was as wonderful as any fairy tale. Indeed, that such a June-like creature should come to them that wintry day — that she had crossed the terrible ocean from a foreign realm far more remote, in the child's consciousness, than fairy-land — seemed quite as strange as if Cinderella had stepped out of the story-book with the avowed purpose of remaining with them until her lost slipper was found. Leonard, big and strong as he was, felt and interpreted the delicate and thrilling organism of his child, and, as Amy turned towards him, he said, with a smile:

"No matter about me. We're old friends; for I've known you ever since you were a little girl at the station. What if you did grow to be a young woman while riding home! Stranger things than that happen every day in story-books, don't they, Johnnie? Johnnie, you must know, has the advantage of the rest of us. She likes bread-and-butter, and kindred realities of our matter-of-fact sphere, but she also has a world of her own, which is quite as real. I think she is inclined to believe that you are a fairy princess, and that you may have a wand in your pocket by which you can restore to her doll the missing nose and arm."

Amy scarcely needed Leonard's words in order to understand the child, for the period was not remote when, in her own mind, the sharp outlines of fact had shaded off into the manifold mysteries of wonderland. Therefore, with an appreciation and a gentleness which won anew all hearts, she took the little girl on her lap, and said, smilingly:

"I have a wee wand with which, I'm sure, I can do much for you, and perhaps something for dolly. I can't claim to be a fairy princess, but I shall try to be as good to you as if I were one."

Webb, with his book upside down, looked at the young girl in a way which proved that he shared in Johnnie's wonder and vague anticipation. Alfred, behind his grandfather's chair, was the only one who felt aggrieved and disappointed. Thus far he had been overlooked, but he did not much care, for this great girl could be no companion for him. Amy, however, had woman's best grace — tact — and guessed his trouble. "Alf," she said, calling him by his household name, and turning upon him her large hazel eyes, which contained spells as yet unknown even to herself — "Alf, don't be disappointed. You shall find that I am not too big to play with you."

The boy yielded at once to a grace which he would be years in learning to understand, and which yet affected him subtilely, and with something of the same influence that it had upon Webb, who felt that a new element was entering into his life. Mercurial Burtis, however, found nothing peculiar in his own pleasant sensations. He had a score of young lady friends, and was merely delighted to find in Amy a very attractive young woman, instead of a child or a dull, plain-featured girl, towards whom brotherly attentions might often become a bore. He lived intensely in the present hour, and was more than content that his adopted sister was quite to his taste.

"Well, Amy," said Mr. Clifford, benignantly, "you seem to have stepped in among us as if there had always been a niche waiting for you, and I think that, after you have broken bread with us, and have had a quiet sleep under the old roof, you will feel at home. Come, I'm going to take you out to supper to-night, and, Burt, do you be as gallant to your mother."

The young fellow made them all laugh by imitating his father's old-style courtesy; and a happy circle of faces gathered around the board in the cheerful supper-room, to which a profuse decoration of evergreens gave a delightfully aromatic odor. Mr. Clifford's "grace" was not a formal mumble, but a grateful acknowledgment of the source from which, as he truly believed, had flowed all the good that had blessed their life; and then followed the genial, unrestrained table-talk of a household that, as yet, possessed no closeted skeleton. The orphan sat among them, and her mourning weeds spoke of a great and recent sorrow, which might have been desolation, but already her kindling eyes and flushed cheeks proved that this strong, bright current of family life would have the power to carry her forward to a new, spring-like experience. To her foreign-bred eyes there was an abundance of novelty in this American home, but it was like the strangeness of heaven to the poor girl, who for months had been so sad and almost despairing. With the strong reaction natural to youth after long depression, her heart responded to the glad life about her, and again she repeated the words to herself, "I'm sure — oh, I am sure I shall be happy here."

CHAPTER III.

A COUNTRY FIRESIDE.

AFTER supper they all gathered for a time in the large general sitting-room, and careful Leonard went the rounds of the barn and out-buildings. Mr. Clifford, with considerate kindness, had resolved to defer all conversation with Amy relating to her bereavement and the scenes that had ensued. At this holiday-time they would make every effort within their power to pierce with light and warmth the cold gray clouds that of late had gathered so heavily over the poor child's life. At the same time their festivities would be subdued by the memory of her recent sorrow, and restricted to their immediate family circle. But, instead of obtrusive kindness, they enveloped her in the home atmosphere, and made her one of them. The manner in which old Mrs. Clifford kept her near and retained her hand was a benediction in itself.

Leonard was soon heard stamping the snow from his boots on the back piazza, and in a few moments he entered, shivering.

"The coldest night of the year," he exclaimed. "Ten below zero, and it will probably be twelve before morning. It's too bad, Amy, that you have had such a cold reception."

"The thermometer makes a good foil for your smile," she replied. "Indeed, I think the mercury rose a little while you were looking at it."

"Oh no," he said, laughing, "even you could not make it rise to-night. Heigho, Ned! coming to kiss good-night? I say, Ned, tell us what mamma has for Amy's stocking. What a good joke it is, to be sure! We all had the impression you were a little girl, you know, and selected our gifts accordingly. Burt actually bought you a doll. Ha! ha! ha! Maggie had planned to have you hang up your stocking with the children, and such a lot of little traps and sweets she has for you!"

The boy, to whom going to bed at the usual hour was a heavy cross on this momentous evening, promptly availed himself of a chance for delay by climbing on Amy's lap, and going into a voluble inventory of the contents of a drawer into which he had obtained several surreptitious peeps. His effort to tell an interminable story that he might sit up longer, the droll havoc he made with his English, and the naming of the toys that were destined for the supposed child, evoked an unforced merriment which banished the last vestige of restraint.

"Well, I'm glad it has all happened so," said Amy, after the little fellow had reluctantly come to the end of his facts and his invention also. "You make me feel as if I had known you for years — almost, indeed, as if I had come to you as a little girl, and had grown up among you. Come, Ned, it shall all turn out just as you expected. I'll go with you up-stairs, and hang my stocking beside yours, and mamma shall put into it all the lovely things you have told me about. Santa Claus does not know much about my coming here, nor what kind of a girl I am, so your kind mamma meant to act the part of Santa Claus in my behalf this year, and give him a chance to get acquainted with me. But he knows all about you, and there's no telling how soon he may come to fill your stocking. You know he has to fill the stockings of all the little boys and girls in the country, and that will take a long time. So I think we had better go at once, for I don't believe he would like it if he came and found you up and awake."

This put a new aspect upon going to bed early, and having seen his short, chubby stocking dangling with a long, slender one of Amy's by the chimney-side, Ned closed his eyes with ineffable content and faith. Amy then returned to the sitting-room, whither she was soon followed by Maggie, and after some further light and laughing talk the conversation naturally drifted towards those subjects in which the family was practically interested.

"What do you think, father?" Leonard asked. "Won't this finish the peach and cherry buds? I've always heard that ten degrees of cold below zero destroyed the fruit germs."

"Not always," replied the man of long experience. "It depends much upon their condition when winter sets in, and whether, previous to the cold snap, there have been prolonged thaws. The new growth on the trees ripened thoroughly last fall, and the frost since has been gradual and steady. I've known peach-buds to survive fifteen below zero; but there's always danger in weather like this. We shall know what the prospects are after the buds thaw out."

"How will that be possible?" Amy asked, in surprise.

"Now, Webb, is your chance to shine," cried Burtis. "Hitherto, Amy, the oracle has usually been dumb, but you may become a priestess who will evoke untold stores of wisdom."

Webb flushed slightly, but again proved that his brother's banter had little influence.

"If you are willing to wait a few days," he said, with a smile, "I can make clear to you, by the aid of a microscope, what father means, much better than I can explain. I can then show you the fruit germs either perfect or blackened by the frost."

"I'll wait, and remind you of your promise, too. I don't know nearly as much about the country as a butterfly or a bird, but should be quite as unhappy as they were I condemned to city life. So you must not laugh at me if I ask no end of questions, and try to put my finger into some of your horticultural pies."

His pleased look contained all the assurance she needed, and he resumed, speaking generally: "The true places for raising peaches — indeed, all the stone-fruits — successfully in this region are the plateaus and slopes of the mountains beyond us.

At their height the mercury never falls as low as it does with us, and when we have not a peach or cherry I have found such trees as existed high up among the hills well laden."

"Look here, uncle Webb," cried Alf, "you've forgotten your geography. The higher you go up the colder it gets."

The young man patiently explained to the boy that the height of the Highlands is not sufficient to cause any material change in climate, while on still nights the coldest air sinks to the lowest levels, and therefore the trees in the valleys and at the base of the mountains suffer the most. "But what you say," he concluded, "is true as a rule. The mercury does range lower on the hills; and if they were a thousand or fifteen hundred feet higher peaches could not be grown at all."

Amy mentally soliloquized: "I am learning not only about the mercury, but also — what Alf has no doubt already found out — that Webb is the one to go to if one wishes anything explained. What's more, he wouldn't, in giving the information, overwhelm one with a sense of deplorable ignorance."

In accordance with his practical bent, Webb continued: "I believe that a great deal of money could be made in the Highlands by raising peaches. The crop would be almost certain, and the large late varieties are those which bring the extraordinary prices. What is more, the mountain land would probably have the quality of virgin soil. You remember, father, don't you, when peaches in this region were scarcely troubled by disease?"

"Indeed I do. There was a time when they would live on almost like apple-trees, and give us an abundance of great luscious fruit year after year. Even with the help of the pigs we could not dispose of the crops, the bulk of which, in many instances, I am sorry to say, went into brandy. What was that you were reading the other day about peaches in Hawthorne's description of the old Manse?"

Webb took the book and read: "Peach-trees which, in a good year, tormented me with peaches neither to be eaten nor kept, nor, without labor and perplexity, to be given away."

"That hits it exactly," resumed the old gentleman, laughing, "only every year was a good year then, and we had not the New York market within three hours of us. Even if we had, a large modern orchard would have supplied it. One of the most remarkable of the changes I've witnessed in my time is the enormous consumption of fruit in large cities. Why, more is disposed of in Newburgh than used to go to New York. But to return to peaches; our only chance for a long time has been to plant young trees every year or two, and we scarcely secured a crop more than once in three years. Even then the yellows often destroyed the trees before they were old enough to bear much. They are doing far better of late along the Hudson, and there is good prospect that this region will become the greatest peach-growing locality in the country."

"I'm sure you are right," assented Webb, "and I think it will pay us to plant largely in the spring. I don't suppose you ever saw a peach-orchard in England, Amy?"

"I don't think I ever did. They were all grown in front of sunny walls, *espalier*, as papa termed it. We had some in our garden."

"Yes," resumed Webb, "the climate there is too cool and humid for even the wood to ripen. Here, on the contrary, we often have too vivid sunshine. I propose that we put out all the north slope in peaches."

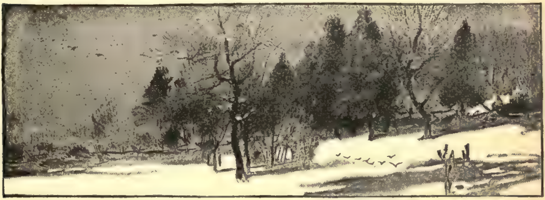
"Do you think a northern exposure best?" Leonard asked.

"I certainly do. In my opinion it is not the frost, unless it be very severe, that plays the mischief with the buds, but alternate freezing and thawing, especially after the buds have started in spring. On a northern slope the buds usually remain dormant until the danger of late frosts is over. I am quite sure, too, that the yellows is a disease due chiefly to careless or dishonest propagation. Pits and buds have been taken from infected trees, and thus the evil has been spread far and wide. There is as much to be gained in the careful and long-continued selection of fruits and vegetables as in the judicious breeding of stock."

"Has no remedy for the yellows been discovered?" Leonard again queried.

"Only the axe and fire. The evil should be extirpated as fast as it appears. Prevention is far better than any attempt at cure. The thing to do is to obtain healthier trees, and then set them out on new land. That's why I think the north slope will be a good place, for peaches have never been grown there in my memory."

"Come, Amy," said Burt. "Len and Webb are now fairly astride of their horticultural hobbies. Come with me, and see the moon shining on old Storm King."



A WINTER MEADOW.

They pushed aside the heavy crimson curtains, which added a sense of warmth to the cheerful room, and looked at the cold white world without — a ghost of a world, it seemed to Amy. The moon, nearly full, had risen in the gap of the Highlands, and had now climbed well above the mountains, softening and etherealizing them until every harsh, rugged outline was lost. The river at their feet looked pallid and ghostly also. When not enchained by frost, lights twinkled here and there all over its broad surface, and the intervals were brief when the throbbing engines of some passing steamer were not heard. Now it was like the face of the dead when a busy life is over.

"It's all very beautiful," said Amy, shivering, "but too cold and still. I love life, and this reminds one of death, the thoughts of which, with all that it involves, have oppressed me so long that I must throw off the burden. I was growing morbid, and giving way to a deeper and deeper depression, and now your sunny home life seems just the antidote for it all."

The warm-hearted fellow was touched, for there were tears in the young girl's eyes. "You have come to the right place, Amy," he said, eagerly. "You cannot love life more than I, and I promise to make it lively for you. I'm just the physician to minister to the mind diseased with melancholy. Trust me. I can do a hundred-fold more for you than delving, matter-of-fact Webb. So come to me when you have the blues. Let us make an alliance offensive and defensive against all the powers of dulness and gloom."

"I'll do my best," she replied, smiling; "but there will be hours, and perhaps days, when the past with its shadows will come back too vividly for me to escape it."

"I'll banish all shadows, never fear. I'll make the present so real and jolly that you will forget the past."

"I don't wish to forget, but only to think of it without the dreary foreboding and sinking of heart that oppressed me till I came here. I know you will do much for me, but I am sure I shall like Webb also."

"Oh, of course you will. He's one of the best fellows in the world. Don't think that I misunderstand him or fail to appreciate his worth because I love to run him so. Perhaps you'll wake him up and get him out of his ruts. But I foresee that I'm the medicine you most need. Come to the fire; you are shivering."

"Oh, I'm so glad that I've found such a home," she said, with a grateful glance, as she emerged from the curtains.

CHAPTER IV.

GUNNING BY MOONLIGHT.

WEBB saw the glance from eyes on which were still traces of tears; he also saw his brother's look of sympathy; and with the kindly purpose of creating a diversion to her thoughts he started up, breaking off his discussion with Leonard, and left the room. A moment later he returned from the hall with the double-barrelled gun.

"What now, Webb?" cried Burt, on the *qui vive.* "You will make Amy think we are attacked by Indians."

"If you are not afraid of the cold, get your gun, and I think I can give you some sport, and, for a wonder, make you useful also," Webb replied. "While you were careering this afternoon I examined the young trees in the nursery, and found that the rabbits were doing no end of mischief. It has been so cold, and the snow is so deep, that the little rascals are gathering near the house. They have gnawed nearly all the bark off the stems of some of the trees, and I doubt whether I can save them. At first I was puzzled by their performances. You know, father, that short nursery row grafted with our seedling apple, the Highland Beauty? Well, I found many of the lower twigs taken off with a sharp, slanting cut, as if they had been severed with a knife, and I imagined that a thrifty neighbor had resolved to share in our monopoly of the new variety, but I soon discovered that the cuttings had been made too much at random to confirm the impression that some one had been gathering scions for grafting. Tracks on the snow, and girdled trees, soon made it evident that rabbits were the depredators. One of the little pests must have climbed into a bushy tree at least eighteen inches from the snow, in order to reach the twigs I found cut."

"A rabbit up a tree!" exclaimed Leonard. "Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"Well, you can see for yourself to-morrow," Webb resumed. "Of course we can't afford to pasture the little fellows on our young trees, and so must feed them until they can be shot or trapped. The latter method will be good fun for you, Alf. This afternoon I placed sweet apples, cabbage-leaves, and turnips around the edge of a little thicket near the trees; and, Burt, you know there is a clump of evergreens near, from whose cover I think we can obtain some good shots. So get your gun, and we'll start even."

At the prospect of sport Burt forgot Amy and everything else, and dashed off.

"Oh, papa, can't I go with them?" pleaded Alf.

"What do you think, Maggie?" Leonard asked his wife, who now entered.

"Well, boys will be boys. If you will let mamma bundle you up —"

"Oh yes, anything, if I can only go!" cried Alf, trembling with excitement.

"Sister Amy," Webb remarked, a little diffidently, "if you care to see the fun, you can get a good view from the window of your room. I'll load my gun in the hall."

"Can I see you load?" Amy asked, catching some of Alf's strong interest. "It's all so novel to me."

"Certainly. I think you will soon find that you can do pretty much as you please in your new home. You are now among republicans, you know, and we are scarcely conscious of any government."

"But I have already discovered one very strong law in this household," she smilingly asserted, as she stood beside him near the hall-table, on which he had placed his powder-flask and shot-pouch.

"Ah, what is that?" he asked, pouring the powder carefully into the muzzles of the gun.

"The law of kindness, of good-will. Why," she exclaimed, "I expected to be weeks in getting acquainted, but here you are all calling me sister Amy as if it were the most natural thing in the world. It seems so odd," she laughed, "that I am not a bit afraid of you, even with your gun, and yet we have just met, as it were. The way you and your brothers say 'sister Amy' makes the relation seem real. I can scarcely believe that I am the same girl that stepped down at the station this evening, nor can I get over my pleased wonder at the transformation."

"Amy," said the young man, earnestly, "your coming promises so much to us all! You were just the one element lacking in our home. I now see. that it was so. I already have the presentiment that you will do more for us than we can for you."

"I ought to do all that the deepest gratitude could prompt. You have never known what it is to be desolate one hour, and to find an ideal home the next."

"I wish it might be an ideal home to you; but don't expect too much. You will find some of us very human."

"Therefore I shall feel the more at home. Papa always spoiled me by letting me have my own way, and I shall often tax your patience. Do you know, I never saw a gun loaded before. There seems to be so much going on here, and I have lived such a quiet life of late. How will you make the thing go off?"

"These little percussion-caps will do the business. It seems to me that I've always been quiet, and perhaps a trifle heavy. I hope you will think it your mission to render me less matter-of-fact. I'm ready now, and here comes Burt with his breech-loader. If you will go to your room now, you can see our shots."

A moment later she stood with Johnnie at her window, both almost holding their breath in expectation as they saw the young men, with Alf following, steal towards a clump of evergreens behind the house.

"Quiet and steady now," Webb cautioned his eager brother; "and, Alf, you step in my tracks, so there may be no noise." Thus they made their way among the pines, and peered cautiously out. "Hold on, Burt," Webb whispered, as the former was bringing his gun to his shoulder; "I want a crack at them as well as yourself. Let's reconnoitre. Yes, there are three or four of the scamps. Let Alf see them. They look so pretty in the moonlight that I've scarcely the heart to disturb, much less to kill them."

"Oh, stop your sentimental nonsense!" muttered Burt, impatiently. "It's confoundedly cold, and they may take fright and disappear."

"Black ingratitude!" Webb exclaimed. "If there isn't one in the apple nursery in spite of all my provision for them! That ends my compunctions. I'll take him, and you that big fellow munching a cabbage-leaf. We'll count three — now, one, two —" The two reports rang out as one, and the watchers at the window saw the flashes, and thrilled at the reverberating echoes.

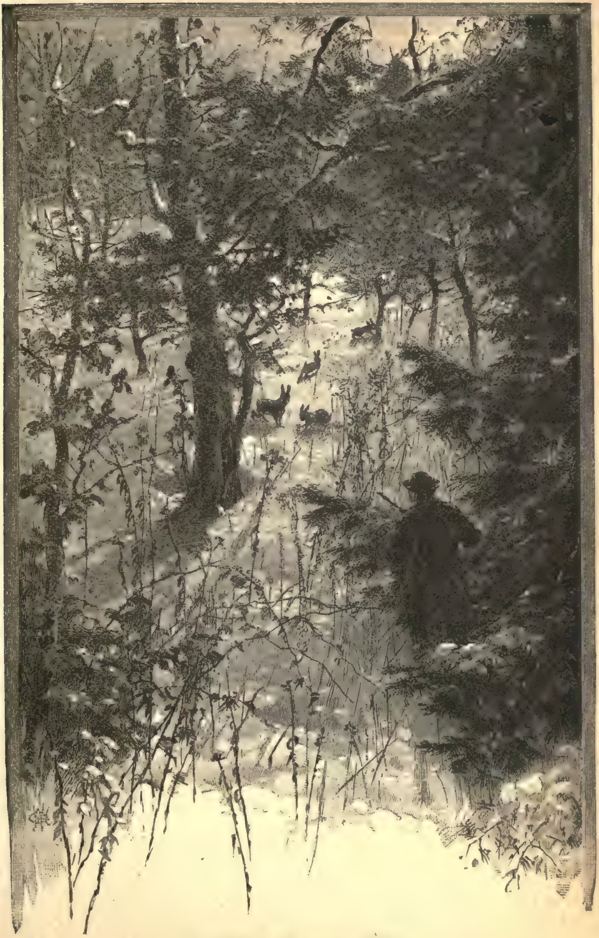
"It's almost as exciting as if they were shooting Indians, robbers, or giants," cried Johnnie, clapping her hands and jumping up and down.

"Back," said Webb to Alf, who was about to rush forward to secure the game; "we may get another shot."

They waited a few moments in vain, and then succumbed to the cold. To Alf was given the supreme delight of picking up the game that lay on the snow, making with their blood the one bit of color in all the white garden.

"Poor little chaps!" Webb remarked, as he joined the family gathered around Alf and the rabbits in the sitting-room. "It's a pity the world wasn't wide enough for us all."

"What has come over you, Webb?" asked Burt, lifting his



HUNTING BY MOONLIGHT.

eyebrows. "Has there been a hidden spring of sentiment in your nature all these years, which has just struck the surface?"

It was evident that nearly all shared in Webb's mild regret that such a sudden period had been put to life at once so pretty, innocent, and harmful. Alf, however, was conscious of only pure exultation. Your boy is usually a genuine savage, governed solely by the primal instinct of the chase and destruction of wild animals. He stroked the fur, and with eyes of absorbed curiosity examined the mischievous teeth, the long ears, the queer little feet that never get cold, and the places where the lead had entered with the sharp deadly shock that had driven out into the chill night the nameless something which had been the little creature's life. Amy, too, stroked the fur with a pity on her face which made it very sweet to Webb, while tender-hearted Johnnie was exceedingly remorseful, and wished to know whether "the bunnies, if put by the fire, would not come to life before morning." Indeed, there was a general chorus of commiseration, which Burt brought to a prosaic conclusion by saying: "Crocodile tears, every one. You'll all enjoy the pot-pie to-morrow with great gusto. By the way, I'll prop up one of these little fellows at the foot of Ned's crib, and in the morning he'll think that the original 'Br'er Rabbit' has hopped out of Uncle Remus's stories to make him a Christmas visit."

CHAPTER V.

CHRISTMAS EVE AND MORNING.

OLD Mrs. Clifford now created a diversion by asking: "How about our plants to-night, Maggie? Ought we not to take some precautions? Once before when it was as cold as this we lost some, you know."

"Leonard," said his wife, in response to the suggestion, "it will be safer for you to put a tub of water in the flower-room; that will draw the frost from the plants. Mother is the queen of the flowers in this house," continued Mrs. Leonard, turning to Amy, "and I think she will be inclined to appoint you first lady in attendance. She finds me cumbered with too many other cares. But it doesn't matter. Mother has only to look at the plants to make them grow and bloom."

"There you are mistaken," replied the old lady, laughing. "Flowers are like babies. I never made much of a fuss over my babies, but I loved them, and saw that they had just what they needed at the right time."

"That accounts for Webb's exuberant growth and spirit, and the ethereal beauty of Len's mature blossoming," remarked Burt.

"You are a plant that never had enough pruning," retorted his portly eldest brother.

"I shall be glad to help you, if you will teach me how," Amy said to Mrs. Clifford.

"In the pruning department?" asked Burt, with assumed dismay.

"Possibly," was the reply, with an arch little look which delighted the young fellow.

"Come, Maggie," said Mrs. Clifford, "sing a Christmas carol before we separate. It will be a pleasant way of bringing our happy evening to a close."

Mrs. Leonard went to the piano. "Amy," she asked, "can't you help me?"

"I'll do my best, if you will choose something I know."

A selection was soon made, and Amy modestly blended a clear, sweet voice with the air that Mrs. Leonard sang, and as the sympathetic tones of the young girl swelled the rich volume of song the others exchanged looks of unaffected pleasure.

"Oh, Amy, I am so glad you can sing!" cried Mrs. Clifford, "for we have always made so much of music in our home."

"Papa," she replied, with moist eyes, "felt as you do, and he had me sing for him ever since I can remember."

"Amy dear," said Mrs. Leonard, in a low voice, "suppose you take the soprano and I the alto in the next stanza."

They were all delighted with the result, and another selection was made, in which Burt's tenor and Webb's bass came in with fine effect.

"Amy, what a godsend you are to us all!" said Leonard, enthusiastically. "I am one of the great army of poets who can't sing, but a poet nevertheless."

"Yes, indeed, Len," added Burt; "it needs but a glance to see that you are of that ethereal mould of which poets and singers are made. But isn't it capital! We now have all the four parts."

"Amy," said Mr. Clifford, "do you know an old Christmas hymn that your father and I loved when we were as young as you are?" and he named it.

"I have often sung it for him, and he usually spoke of you when I did so;" and she sang sweet, undying words to a sweet, quaint air in a voice that trembled with feeling.

The old gentleman wiped his eyes again and again. "Ah!"

he said, "how that takes me back into the past! My friend and I knew and loved that air and hymn over sixty years ago. I can see him now as he looked then. God bless his child, and now my child!" he added, as he drew Amy caressingly towards him. "A brief evening has made you one of us. I thank God that he has sent one whom it will be so easy for us all to love; and we gratefully accept you as a Christmas gift from Heaven."

Then, with the simplicity of an ancient patriarch, he gathered his household around the family altar, black Abram and two maids entering at his summons, and taking seats with an air of deference near the door. Not long afterwards the old house stood silent and dark in the pallid landscape.

Though greatly wearied, Amy was kept awake during the earlier part of the night by the novelty of her new life and relations, and she was awakened in the late dawn of the following day by exclamations of delight from Mrs. Leonard's room. She soon remembered that it was Christmas morning. The children evidently had found their stockings, for she heard Johnnie say, "Oh, mamma, do you think aunt Amy is awake? I would so like to take her stocking to her!"

"Yes," cried Amy, "I'm awake;" and the little girl, draped in white, soon pushed open the door, holding her own and Amy's stockings in hands that trembled with delightful anticipation.

"Jump into bed with me," said Amy, "and we will empty our stockings together."

The years rolled back, the previous months of sorrow and suffering were forgotten; the day, the hour, with its associations, the eager child that nestled close to her, made her a child again. She yielded wholly to her mood; she would be a little girl once more, Johnnie's companion in feeling and delight; and the morning of her life was still so new that the impulses of that enchanted age before the light of experience has defined the world into its matter-of-fact proportions came back unforced and unaffected. Her voice vied with Johnnie's in its notes of excitement and pleasure, and to more than one who heard her it seemed that their first impression was correct, that a little child had come to them, and that the tall, graceful maiden was a myth.

"Merry Christmas, Amy!" cried the voice of Webb on the stairs.

The child vanished instantly, and a blushing girl let fall the half-emptied stocking. Something in that deep voice proved that if she were not yet a woman, she had drawn so near that mystery of life that its embarrassing self-consciousness was beginning to assert itself. "How silly he will think me!" was her mental comment, as she returned his greeting in a voice that was rather faint.

The "rising bell" now resounded through the house, and she sprang up with the purpose of making amends by a manner of marked dignity. And yet there remained with her a sense of home security, of a great and new-found happiness, which the cold gray morning could not banish. The air-tight stove glowed with heat and comfort, and she afterwards learned that Mrs. Leonard had replenished the fire so noiselessly as not to awaken her. The hearty Christmas greetings of the family as she came into the breakfast-room were like an echo of the angels' song of "good-will." The abounding kindliness and genuine pleasure at her presence made the feeling that she had indeed become one of the household seem the most natural thing in the world, instead of a swiftly wrought miracle.

Little Ned had in his arms one of the rabbits that had been shot on the previous evening, and to him it was more wonderful than all his toys. "You should have seen him when he awoke," said his mother, "and saw the poor little thing propped up at the foot of his crib. His eyes grew wider and rounder, and at last he breathed, in an awed whisper, 'Br'er Rabbit.' But he soon overcame his surprise, and the jargon he talked to it made our sides ache with laughing."

The gifts that had been prepared for the supposed child were taken by Amy in very good part, but with the tact of a well-bred girl who would not spoil a jest, rather than with the undisguised delight of Johnnie.

"Only Johnnie and I have seen little Amy," said Leonard — "I at the depot before she grew up; and this morning she became a little girl again as a Christmas wonder for my little girl. Johnnie's faith and fairy lore may make the transformation possible to her again, but I fear the rest of us will never catch another glimpse of the child we expected;" for Amy's grown-up air since she had appeared in the breakfast-room had been almost a surprise to him after hearing through the partition her pretty nonsense over her stocking.

"I fear you are right," said Amy, with a half-sigh; "and yet it was lovely to feel just like Johnnie once more;" and she stole a shy glance at Webb, who must have heard some of her exclamations. The expression of his face seemed to reassure her, and without further misgiving she joined in a laugh at one of Burt's sallies.

CHAPTER VI.

NATURE'S HALF-KNOWN SECRETS.

AMY'S thoughts naturally reverted before very long to Mrs. Clifford's pets — the flowers — and she asked how they had endured the intense cold of the night.

"They have had a narrow escape," the old lady replied. "If Maggie had not suggested the tub of water last night, I fear we should have lost the greater part of them."

"Yes," said Mrs. Leonard, "I went to the flower-room with fear and trembling this morning, and when I found the water frozen thick I was in despair."

"It was the water freezing that saved the plants," Webb remarked, quietly. "I put water in the root-cellar before I went to bed last night, with like good effect."

"Well, for the life of me," said Maggie, "I can't understand why the plants and roots don't freeze when water does."

"Come, Burt," added her husband, "you are a college-bred man. You explain how the water draws the frost from the plants."

"Oh, bother!" Burt answered, flushing slightly, "I've forgotten. Some principle of latent heat involved, I believe. Ask Webb. If he could live long enough he'd coax from Nature all her secrets. He's the worst Paul Pry into her affairs that I ever knew. So beware, Amy, unless you are more secretive than Nature, which I cannot believe, since you seem so natural."

"I'm afraid your knowledge, Burt, resembles latent heat," laughed Leonard. "Come, see what you can do, Webb."

"Burt is right," said Webb, good-naturedly; "the principle of latent heat explains it all, and he could refresh his memory in a few moments. The water does not draw the frost from the plants, but before it can freeze it must give out one hundred and forty degrees of latent heat. The flower-room and root-cellar were therefore so much warmer during the night than if the water had not been there. The plants that were nipped probably suffered after the ice became so thick as to check in a great measure the freezing process."

"How can ice stop water from freezing?" Alf asked, in much astonishment.

"By keeping it warm, on the same principle that your bed-clothes kept you warm last night. Heat passes very slowly through ice — that is, it is a poor conductor. With the snow it is the winter wrap of nature, which protects all life beneath it. When our ponds and rivers are once frozen over, the latent heat in the water beneath can escape through the ice but very gradually, and every particle of ice that forms gives out into the water next to it one hundred and forty degrees of heat. Were it not for these facts our ponds would soon become solid. But to return to the tub of water in the flower-room. The water, when placed there, was probably warmer than the air, and so would give out or radiate its heat until a thermometer, placed either in the room or in the water, would mark thirty-two degrees above zero. At this point the water would begin to freeze, but plants or vegetables would not. They would require slightly severer cold to affect them. But as soon as the water begins to freeze it also gradually gives out its latent heat, and before a particle of ice can form it must give out one hundred and forty degrees of heat to the air and water around it. Therefore the freezing process goes on slowly, and both the air and water are kept comparatively warm. After a time, however, the ice becomes so thick over the surface that the freezing goes on more and more slowly, because the latent heat in the unfrozen water cannot readily escape through the ice. It is therefore retained, just as the latent heat in the water of an ice-covered pond is retained."

"It follows, then," said Leonard, "that after the water beneath the ice in the tub began to freeze slowly, the flower-room, in that same degree, began to grow cold."

"Certainly, for only as the water freezes can it give out its latent heat. The thick wooden side of the tub is a poor conductor; the ice that has formed over the surface is even a worse, and so the water within is shielded from the cold. It therefore almost ceases to freeze, and so becomes of no practical use. An intelligent understanding of these principles is of great practical value. If I could have waked up and placed another tub of water in the room at two or three o'clock, or else taken all of the ice out of the first one, the process of freezing and giving out heat would have gone on rapidly again, and none of the plants would have suffered. I have heard people say that putting water in a cellar was all a humbug — that the water froze and the vegetables also. Of course the vegetables froze after the water congealed, or the cellar may have been so defective that both froze at the same time. The latent heat given out by a small amount of freezing water cannot counteract any great severity of frost."

"The more water you have, then, the better?" said his father.

"Yes, for then there is more to freeze, and the effect is more gradual and lasting."

"I feel highly honored, Webb," said his mother, smiling, "that so much science should minister to me and my little collection of plants. I now see that the why and wherefore comes in very usefully. But please tell me why you put the plants that were touched with frost into cold water, and why you will not let the sunlight fall on them?"

"For the same reason that you would put your hand in cold water if frost-bitten. Your expression, 'touched with frost,' shows that there is hope for them. If they were thoroughly frozen you would lose them. Your plants, you know, are composed chiefly of water, which fills innumerable little cells formed by the vegetable tissue. If the water in the cells is chilled beyond a certain point, if it becomes solid ice, it expands and breaks down the tissue of the cells, and the structure of the plant is destroyed. If the frost can be gradually withdrawn so as to leave the cells substantially intact, they can eventually resume their functions, and the plant receive no very great injury."

"But why does sudden heat or sunlight destroy a frosted plant?"

"For the same reason that it breaks down the vegetable tissue. Heat expands, and the greater the heat the more rapid the expansion. When the rays of the sun, which contain a great deal of heat, fall on any part of a frost-bitten plant, that part begins to expand so rapidly and violently that the cellular tissues are ruptured, and life is destroyed. What is more, the heat does not permeate equally and at once the parts affected by frost. The part farthest away from the heat remains contracted, while the parts receiving it expand rapidly and unequally, and this becomes another cause for the breaking up of the vegetable tissue. The same principle is illustrated when we turn up the flame of a lamp suddenly. The glass next to the flame expands so rapidly that the other parts cannot keep pace, and so, as the result of unequal expansion, the chimney goes to pieces. With this principle in mind, we seek to withdraw the frost and to re-apply the vivifying heat very gradually and equally to every part, so that the vegetable tissues may be preserved unbroken. This is best done by immersing them in cold water, and then keeping them at a low temperature in a shady place. As the various parts of the plant resume their functions, the light and heat essential to its life and growth can gradually be increased."

"It seems to me that your theory is at fault, Webb," said Leonard. "How is it that some plants are able to endure such violent alternations of heat and cold?"

"We don't have to go far — at least I do not — before coming to the limitations of knowledge. What it is in the structure of a plant like the pansy, for instance, which makes it so much more hardy than others that seem stronger and more vigorous, even the microscope does not reveal. Nature has plenty of secrets that she has not yet told. But of all people in the world those who obtain their livelihood from the soil should seek to learn the wherefore of everything, for such knowledge often doubles the prospect of success."

"Now, Amy," said Burtis, laughing, "you see what sort of a fellow Webb is. You cannot even sneeze without his considering the wherefore back to the remotest cause."

"Are you afraid of me, Amy?" asked Webb.

"No," was the quiet reply.

Amy spent the greater part of the day in unpacking her trunks, and in getting settled in her home-like room. It soon began to take on a familiar air. Hearts, like plants, strike root rapidly when the conditions are favorable. Johnnie was her delighted assistant much of the time, and this Christmas-day was one long thrill of excitement to the child. Her wonder grew and grew, for there was a foreign air about many of Amy's things, and, having been brought from such a long distance, they seemed to belong to another world. The severe cold continued, and only the irrepressible Burtis ventured out to any extent. When Alf's excitement over his presents began to flag, Webb helped him make two box-traps, and the boy concealed them in the copse where the rabbit-tracks were thickest. Only the biting frost kept him, in his intense eagerness, from remaining out to see the result. Webb, however, taught him patience by assuring him that watched traps never caught game.

Beyond the natural home festivities the day passed quietly, and this was also true of the entire holiday season. Cheerfulness, happiness abounded, and there was an unobtrusive effort on the part of every one to surround the orphan girl with a genial, sunny atmosphere. And yet she was ever made to feel that her sorrow was remembered and respected. She saw that Mr. Clifford's mind was often busy with the memory of his friend, that even Burt declined invitations to country merry-makings in the vicinity, and that she was saved the ordeal of meeting gay young neighbors with whom the Clifford home was a favorite resort. In brief, they had received her as a daughter of the house, and in many delicate ways proved that they regarded her as entitled to the same consideration as if she were one. Meanwhile she was shown that her presence cast no gloom over the family life, and she knew and they knew that it would be her father's wish that she should share in all the healing gladness of that life. No true friend who has passed on to the unclouded shore would wish to leave clouds and chilling shadows as a legacy, and they all felt that in Amy's case it had been her father's desire and effort to place her under conditions that would develop her young life happily and therefore healthfully. There is the widest difference in the world between cheerfulness and mirthfulness which arise from happy home life and peaceful hearts, and the levity that is at once unfeeling, inconsiderate, and a sure indication of a coarse-fibred, ill-bred nature. Amy was made to feel this, and she found little indeed which jarred with memories that were only sad, not bitter or essentially depressing. Every day brought new assurance that her father's wishes and hopes in her behalf had been fulfilled to a degree that must have added to his heavenly content, could he have known how well he had provided for her. And so the busy days glided on; and when the evening brought the household together, there were music, reading aloud, and genial family talk, which usually was largely colored by their rural calling. Therefore, on New-Year's morning Amy stood as upon a sunny eminence, and saw her path leading away amid scenes that promised usefulness, happiness, and content.

CHAPTER VII.

NEIGHBORS DROP IN.

ONE evening early in the year three neighbors dropped in. They were evidently as diverse in character as in appearance. The eldest was known in the neighborhood as Squire Bartley, having long been a justice of the peace. He was a large landholder, and carried on his farm in the old-fashioned ways, without much regard to system, order, or improvement. He had a big, good-natured red face, a stout, burly form, and a corresponding voice. In marked contrast with his aspect and past experience was Mr. Alvord, who was thin almost to emaciation, and upon whose pallid face not only ill-health but deep mental suffering had left their unmistakable traces. He was a new-comer into the vicinity, and little was known of his past history beyond the fact that he had exchanged city life for country pursuits in the hope of gaining strength and vigor. He ought to have been in the full prime of cheerful manhood, but his sombre face and dark, gloomy eyes indicated that something had occurred in the past which so deeply shadowed his life as to make its long continuance doubtful. He had not reached middle age, and yet old Mr. Clifford appeared a heartier man than he. While he had little knowledge of rural occupations, he entered into them with eagerness, apparently finding them an antidote for sad memories. He had little to say, but was a good listener, and evidently found at the Cliffords' a warmth and cheer coming not from the hearth only. Webb and Leonard had both been very kind to him in his inexperience, and an occasional evening at their fireside was the only social tendency that he had been known to indulge. Dr. Marvin, the third visitor, might easily compete with Burt in flow of spirits, and in his day had been quite as keen a sportsman. But he was unlike Burtis in this, that all birds were game to him, and for his purpose were always in season. To Emerson's line,

> "Hast thou named all the birds without a gun?"

he could not reply in the affirmative, and yet to kill as many as possible had never been his object. From earliest childhood he had developed a taste for ornithology, and the study of the fauna of the region had been almost his sole recreation for years. He too was a frequent visitor at the Cliffords', where he ever found ready listeners and questioners.

"I don't know what is the matter with my poultry," Squire Bartley remarked, after the weather, politics, and harmless phases of local gossip had been discussed; "they are getting as poor as crows. My boys say that they are fed as well as usual. What's more, I've had them throw down for 'em a warm mixture of meal and potatoes before they go to roost, but we don't get an egg. What luck are you having, Leonard?"

"Well, I don't know that I'm having much luck in the matter," Leonard replied, with his humorous smile; "but I can't complain. Until this very cold weather set in we had eggs in plenty, and still have a fair supply. I'm inclined to think that if your hens are the right kind, and are properly cared for, they can't help producing eggs. That has usually been my experience. I don't believe much in luck, but there are a few simple things that are essential to success with poultry in winter. By the way, do you give them well or spring water to drink?"

"Well, no, I don't believe we do, at this time of year. I've so arranged it that the drippings from the eaves of the barn fall into a trough, and that saves trouble. I expect the boys are careless, too, for I've seen the fowls eating snow and ice."

"That accounts for your poultry being like crows, for, whatever the reason may be, snow-water will soon reduce chickens to mere feathers and bones."

"You don't say so!" cried the squire. "Well, I never heard that before.".

"I don't think your system of feeding is the correct one, either," pursued Leonard. "You give your hens the warm meal to-morrow evening, as usual, and then about midnight go to the roosts and feel of their crops. I'll warrant you'll find them empty. The meal, you see, digests speedily, and is soon all gone. Then come the long cold hours before morning, and the poor creatures have nothing to sustain them, and they become chilled and enfeebled. It takes some time for the grain you give them in the morning to digest, and so they are left too long a time without support. Give them the grain in the evening — corn and buckwheat and barley mixed — and there is something for their gizzards to act on all night long. The birds are thus sustained and kept warm by their food. Then in the morning, when they naturally feel the cold the most, give them the warm food, mixing a little pepper with it during such weather as this."

"Well," remarked the squire, "I guess you're right. Anyway, I'll try your plan. One is apt to do things the same way year after year without much thought about it."

"Then, again," resumed Leonard, "I find it pays to keep poultry warm, clean, and well sheltered. In very cold weather I let them out only for an hour or two. The rest of the time they are shut up in the chicken-house, which has an abundance of light, and is well ventilated. Beneath the floor of the chicken-house is a cellar, which I can fill with stable manure, and graduate the heat by its fermentation. This acts like a steady furnace. There is room in the cellar to turn the manure from time to time to prevent its becoming fire-fanged, so that there is no loss in this respect. Between the heat from beneath, and the sun streaming in the windows on the south side of the house, I can keep my laying hens warm even in zero weather; and I make it a point not to have too many. Beyond a certain number, the more you have the worse you're off, for poultry won't stand crowding."

"You farmers," put in Dr. Marvin, "are like the doctors, who kill or cure too much by rule and precedent. You get into certain ways or ruts, and stick to them. A little thought and observation would often greatly modify your course. Now in regard to your poultry, you should remember that they all existed once as nature made them — they were wild, and domestication cannot wholly change their character. It seems to me that the way to learn how to manage fowls successfully is to observe their habits and modes of life when left to themselves. In summer, when they have a range, we find them eating grass, seeds, insects, etc. In short, they are omnivorous. In winter, when they can't get these things, they are often fed one or two kinds of grain continuously. Now, from their very nature, they need in winter all the kinds of food that they instinctively select when foraging for themselves — fresh vegetables, meat, and varieties of seeds or grain. We give to our chickens all the refuse from the kitchen — the varied food we eat ourselves, with the exception of that which contains a large percentage of salt — and they thrive and lay well. Before they are two years old we decapitate them. Old fowls, with rare exceptions, will not lay in winter."

Sad-eyed Mr. Alvord listened as if there were more consolation and cheer in this talk on poultry than in the counsel of sages. The "chicken fever" is more inevitable in a man's life than the chicken-pox, and sooner or later all who are exposed succumb to it. Seeing the interest developing in his neighbor's face, Leonard said, briskly:

"Mr. Alvord, here's an investment that will pay you to consider. The care of poultry involves light and intelligent labor, and therefore is adapted to those who cannot well meet the rough and heavy phases of out-door work. The fowls often become pets to their keepers, and the individual oddities and peculiarities of character form an amusing study which is not wanting in practical advantages. The majority of people keep ordinary barn-door fowls, which are the result of many breeds or strains. The consequence is almost as great diversity of character within gallinaceous limits as exists in the families that care for them. For instance, one hen is a good, persistent layer; another is a patient, brooding mother; a third is fickle, and leaves her nest so often and for such long intervals that the eggs become chilled, and incubation ceases. Some are tame and tractable, others as wild as hawks, and others still are not of much account in any direction, and are like commonplace women, who are merely good to count when the census is taken."

"I hope you make no reference to present company," Maggie remarked.

Leonard gave his wife one of his humorous looks as he replied, "I never could admit that in regard to you, for it would prove too much against myself. The idea of my picking out a commonplace woman!"

"Leonard knows, as we all do, that he would be like a decapitated chicken himself without her," said Mrs. Clifford, with her low laugh.

Maggie smiled. This was re-assuring from the mother of the eldest and favorite son.

"Well," remarked Squire Bartley, sententiously, "there are old housewives in the neighborhood that have more luck with poultry than any of you, with all your science."

"Nonsense," replied Dr. Marvin. "You know a little about law, squire, and I less about medicine, perhaps, and yet any good mother could take care of a lot of children better than we could. There is old Mrs. Mulligan, on the creek road. She raises ducks, geese, and chickens innumerable, and yet I fail to see much luck in her management; but she has learned from experience a better skill than the books could have taught her, for she said to me one day, 'I jis thries to foind out what the crathers wants, and I gives it to 'em.' She knows the character of every hen, duck, and goose she has, and you don't catch her wasting a sitting of eggs under a fickle biddy. And then she watches over her broods as Mrs. Leonard does over hers. Don't talk about luck. There has been more of intelligent care than luck in bringing up this boy Alf. I believe in book-farming as much as any one, but a successful farmer could not be made by books only; nor could I ever learn to be a skilful physician from books, although all the horses on your place could not haul the medical literature extant. I must adopt Mrs. Mulligan's tactics, and so must you. We must find out 'what the crathers want,' be they plants, stock, or that most difficult subject of all, the human crather. He succeeds best who does this *in* season, and not out of season."

"You are right, doctor," said Leonard, laughing. "I agree with what you say about the varied diet of poultry in general, and also in particular, and I conform my practice to your views. At the same time I am convinced that failure and partial success with poultry result more from inadequate shelter and lack of cleanliness than from lack of proper food. It does not often happen in the country that fowls are restricted to a narrow yard or run, and when left to themselves they pick up, even in winter, much and varied food in and about the barn. But how rarely is proper shelter provided! It is almost as injurious for poultry as it would be for us to be crowded, and subjected to draughts, dampness, and cold. They may survive, but they can't thrive and be profitable. In many instances they are not even protected from storms, and it's a waste of grain to feed poultry that roost under a dripping roof."

"Well," said the squire, "I guess we've been rather slack. I must send my boys over to see how you manage."

"Amy," remarked Burtis, laughing, "you are very polite. You are trying to look as if you were interested."

"I am interested," said the young girl, positively. "One of the things I liked best in English people was their keen interest in all rural pursuits. Papa did not care much for such things; but now that I am a country girl I intend to learn all I can about country life."

Amy had not intended this as a politic speech, but it nevertheless won her the increased good-will of all present. Burtis whispered,

"Let me be your instructor."

Something like a smile softened Webb's rugged face, but he did not raise his eyes from the fire.

"If her words are not the result of a passing impulse," he thought, "sooner or later she will come to me. Nature, however, tolerates no fitful, half-hearted scholars, and should she prove one, she will be contented with Burt's out-of-door fun."

"Miss Amy," remarked Dr. Marvin, vivaciously, "if you will form some of my tastes you will never suffer from *ennui*. Don't be alarmed; I have not drugs in my mind. Doctors rarely take their own medicine. You don't look very strong, and have come back to your native land with the characteristics of a delicate American girl, rather than the vigor of an English one. I fear you slighted British beef and mutton. If I were so officious as to prescribe unasked, I should put you on birds for several months, morning, noon, and evening. Don't you be officious also, Burt. It's on the end of your tongue to say that you will shoot them for her. I had no such commonplace meaning. I meant that Miss Amy should enjoy the birds in their native haunts, and learn to distinguish the different varieties by their notes, plumage, and habits. Such recreation would take her often out-of-doors, and fill every spring and summer day with zest."

"But, Dr. Marvin," cried Amy, "is not the study of ornithology rather a formidable undertaking?"

"Yes," was the prompt reply. "I sometimes feel as if could devote several lifetimes to it. But is it such a formidable thing to begin with a few of our commonest birds, like the robin or wren, for instance; to note when they first arrive from their southern sojourn, the comical scenes of courtship and rivalry in the trees about the door, the building of their homes, and their housekeeping? I am sorry to say that I find some of my patients consumed with a gossipy interest in their neighbors' affairs. If that interest were transferred to the families residing in the cherry and apple trees, to happy little homes that often can be watched even from our windows, its exercise would have a much better effect on health and character. When a taste for such things is once formed, it is astonishing how one thing leads to another, and how fast knowledge is gained. The birds will soon begin to arrive, Miss Amy, and a goodly number stay with us all winter. Pick out a few favorite kinds, and form their intimate acquaintance. I would suggest that you learn to identify some of the birds that nest near the house, and follow their fortunes through the spring and as late in the summer as their stay permits, keeping a little diary of your observations. Alf here will be a famous ally. You will find these little bird histories, as they develop from day to day, more charming than a serial story."

It were hard to tell who was the more captivated by the science of ornithology, Amy or Alf, when this simple and agreeable method for its study was suggested. Mr. Alvord looked wistfully at the unalloyed pleasure of the boy and the young girl as they at once got together on the sofa and discussed the project. He quietly remarked to the doctor, "I also shall make time to follow your suggestion, and shall look forward to some congenial society without my home if not within it."

"See what comes from being enthusiastic about a thing!" laughed the doctor. "I have made three converts."

Mrs. Leonard looked furtively and pityingly at the lonely Mr. vord. A man without a wife to take care of him was to her one of the forlornest of objects, and with secret satisfaction she thought, "Leonard, I imagine, would find the birds' housekeeping a poor substitute for mine."

CHAPTER VIII.

EAGLES.

"SPEAKING of birds, doctor, there are some big fellows around this winter," said Burtis. "While in the mountains with the wood teams some days since I saw a gray and a bald eagle sailing around, but could not get a shot at them. As soon as it grows milder I am going up to the cliffs on the river to see if I can get within rifle range."

"Oh, come, Burt, I thought you were too good a sportsman to make such a mistake," the doctor rejoined. "A gray eagle is merely a young bald eagle. We have only two species of the genuine eagle in this country, the bald, or American, and the golden, or ring-tailed. The latter is very rare, for their majesties are not fond of society, even of their own kind, and two nests are seldom found within thirty miles of each other. The bald eagle has been common enough, and I have shot many. One morning long ago I shot two, and had quite a funny experience with one of them."

"Pray tell us about it," said Burtis, glad of a diversion from his ornithological shortcomings.

"Well, one February morning (I could not have been much over fourteen at the time) I crossed the river on the ice, and took the train for Peekskill. Having transacted my business and procured a good supply of ammunition, I started homeward. From the car windows I saw two eagles circling over the cliffs of the lower Highlands, and with the rashness and inexperience of a boy I determined to leave the train while it was under full headway. I passed through to the rear car, descended to the lowest step, and, without realizing my danger, watched for a level place that promised well for the mad project. Such a spot soon occurring, I grasped the iron rail tightly with my right hand, and with my gun in my left I stepped off into the snow, which was wet and slushy. My foot bounded up and back as if I had been india-rubber, and maintaining my hold I streamed away behind the car in an almost horizontal position. About once in every thirty feet my foot struck the ground, bounded up and back, and I streamed away again as if I were towed or carried through the air. After taking a few steps of this character, which exceeded any attributed to giants in fairy-lore, I saw I was in for it, and the next time my foot struck I let go, and splashed, with a force that I even now ache to think of, into the wet snow. It's a wonder I didn't break my neck, but I scrambled up not very much the worse for my tumble. There were the eagles; my gun was all right, and that was all I cared for at the time. I soon loaded, using the heaviest shot I had, and in a few moments the great birds sailed over my head. I devoted a barrel to each, and down they both came, fluttering, whirling, and uttering cries that Wilson describes as something like a maniacal laugh. One lodged in the top of a tall hemlock, and stuck; the other came flapping and crashing through another tree until stopped by the lower limbs, where it remained. I now saw that their distance had been so great that I had merely disabled them, and I began reloading, but I was so wild from excitement and exultation that I put in the shot first. Of course my caps only snapped, and the eagle in the hemlock top, recovering a brief renewal of strength after the shock of his wound, flew slowly and heavily away, and fell on the ice near the centre of the river. I afterwards learned that it was carried off by some people on an ice-boat. The other eagle, whose wing I had broken, now reached the ground, and I ran towards it, determined that I should not lose both of my trophies. As I approached I saw that I had an ugly customer to deal with, for the bird, finding that he could not escape, threw himself on his back, with his tail doubled under him, and was prepared to strike blows with talons and beak that would make serious wounds. I resolved to take my game home alive, and after a little thought cut a crotched stick, with which I held his head down while I fastened his feet together. A man who now appeared walking down the track aided me in securing the fierce creature, which task we accomplished by tying some coarse bagging round his wings, body, and talons. I then went on to the nearest station in order to take the train homeward. Of course the eagle attracted a great deal of attention in the cars — more than he seemed to enjoy, for he soon grew very restless. I was approaching my destination, and three or four people were about me, talking, pointing, and trying to touch the bird, when he made a sudden dive. The bagging round his wings and feet gave way, and so did the people on every side. Down through the aisle, flapping and screaming, went the eagle; and the ladies, with skirts abridged, stood on the seats and screamed quite as discordantly. Not a man present would help me, but, mounting on their seats, they vociferated advice. The conductor appeared on the scene, and I said that if he would head the bird off I would catch him. This he agreed to do, but he no sooner saw the eagle bearing down on him with his savage eye and beak than he, as nimbly as the best of them, hopped upon a seat, and stood beside a woman, probably for her protection. A minute or two later the train stopped at my station, and I was almost desperate. Fortunately I was in the last car, and I drove my eagle towards the rear door, from which, by the vigorous use of my feet, I induced him to alight on the ground — the first passenger of the kind, I am sure, that ever left the cars at that station. After several minor adventures, I succeeded in getting him home. I hoped to keep him alive, but he would not eat; so I stuffed him in the only way I could, and he is now one of my specimens."

"Well," said Burt, laughing, "that exceeds any eagle adventure that I have heard of in this region. In the car business you certainly brought his majesty down to the prose of common life, and I don't wonder the regal bird refused to eat thereafter."

"Cannot eagles be tamed — made gentle and friendly?" old Mrs. Clifford asked. "I think I remember hearing that you had a pet eagle years ago."

"Yes, I kept one — a female — six months. She was an unusually large specimen, and measured about eight feet with wings extended. The females of all birds of prey, you know, are larger than the males. As in the former case, I had broken one of her wings, and she also threw herself on her back and made her defence in the most savage manner. Although I took every precaution in my power, my hands were bleeding in several places before I reached home, and, in fact, she kept them in a rather dilapidated condition all the time I had her. I placed her in a large empty room connected with the barn, and found her ready enough to eat. Indeed, she was voracious, and the savage manner in which she tore and swallowed her food was not a pleasant spectacle. I bought several hundred live carp — a cheap, bony fish — and put them in a ditch where I could take them with a net as I wanted them. The eagle would spring upon a fish, take one of her long hops into a corner, and tear off its head with one stroke of her beak. While I was curing her broken wing the creature tolerated me after a fashion, but when she was well she grew more and more savage and dangerous. Once a Dutchman, who worked for us, came in with me, and the way the eagle chased that man around the room and out of the door, he swearing meanwhile in high German and on a high key, was a sight to remember. I was laughing immoderately, when the bird swooped down on my shoulder, and the scars would have been there to-day had not her talons been dulled by their constant attrition with the boards of her extemporized cage. Covering my face with my arm — for she could take one's eye out by a stroke of her beak — I also retreated. She then dashed against the window with such force that she bent the wood-work and broke every pane of glass. She seemed so wild for freedom that I gave it to her, but the foolish creature, instead of sailing far away, lingered on a bluff near the river, and soon boys and men were out after her with shot-guns. I determined that they should not mangle her to no purpose, and so, with the aid of my rifle, I added her also to my collection of specimens."

"Have you ever found one of their nests?" Webb asked.

A WHITE LANDSCAPE.

"Yes. They are rather curious affairs, and are sometimes five feet in diameter each way, and quite flat at the top. They use for the substratum of the domicile quite respectable cord-wood sticks, thicker than one's wrist. The mother-bird must be laying her eggs at this season, cold as it is. But they don't mind the cold, for they nest above the arctic circle."

"I don't see how it is possible for them to protect their eggs and young in such severe weather," Mrs. Clifford remarked.

"Nature takes care of her own in her own way," replied the doctor, with a slight shrug. "One of the birds always remains on the nest."

"Well," said Squire Bartley, who had listened rather impatiently to so much talk about an unprofitable bird, "I wish my hens were laying now. Seems to me that Nature does better by eagles and crows than by any fowls I ever had. Good-night, friends."

With a wistful glance at Amy's pure young face, and a sigh so low that only pitiful Mrs. Leonard heard it, Mr. Alvord also bowed himself out in his quiet way.

"Doctor," said Burtis, resolutely, "you have excited my strongest emulation, and I shall never be content until I have brought down an eagle or two."

"Dear me!" cried the doctor, looking at his watch, "I should think that you would have had enough of eagles, and of me also, by this time. Remember, Miss Amy, I prescribe birds, but don't watch a bald-eagle's nest too closely. We are not ready to part with your bright eyes any more than you are."

CHAPTER IX.

SLEIGHING IN THE HIGHLANDS.

DURING the night there was a slight fall of snow, and Webb explained at the breakfast-table that its descent had done more to warm the air than would have been accomplished by the fall of an equal amount of red-hot sand. But more potent than the freezing particles of vapor giving off their latent heat were the soft south wind and the bright sunshine, which seemingly had the warmth of May.

"Come, Amy," said Burtis, exultantly, "this is no day to mope in the house. If you will trust yourself to me and Thunder, you shall skim the river there as swiftly as you can next summer on the fastest steamer."

Amy was too English to be afraid of a horse, and with wraps that soon proved burdensome in the increasing warmth of the day, she and Burt dashed down the slopes and hill that led to the river, and out upon the wide, white plain. She was a little nervous as she thought of the fathoms of cold, dark water beneath her; but when she saw the great loads of lumber and coal that were passing to and fro on the track she was convinced that the ice-bridge was safe, and she gave herself up to the unalloyed enjoyment of the grand scenery. First they crossed Newburgh Bay, with the city rising steeply on one side, and the Beacon Mountains farther away on the other. The snow covered the ice unbrokenly, except as tracks crossed here and there to various points. Large flocks of crows were feeding on these extemporized roadways, and they looked blacker than crows in the general whiteness. As the sleigh glided here and there it was hard for Amy to believe that they were in the track of steamers and innumerable sail-boats, and that the distant shores did not slope down to a level plain, on which the grass and grain would wave in the coming June; but when Burt turned southward and drove under the great beetling mountains, and told her that their granite feet were over a hundred yards deep in the water, she understood the marvellous engineering of the frost-spirit that had spanned the river, where the tides are so swift, and had so strengthened it in a few short days and nights that it could bear enormous burdens.

Never before had she seen such grand and impressive scenery. They could drive within a few feet of the base of Storm King and Cro' Nest; and the great precipices and rocky ledges, from which often hung long, glittering icicles, seemed tenfold more vast than when seen from a distance. The furrowed granite cliffs, surmounted by snow, looked like giant faces, lined and wrinkled by age and passion. Even the bright sunshine could do little to soften their frowning grandeur. Amy's face became more and more serious as the majesty of the landscape impressed her, and she grew silent under Burtis's light talk. At last she said:

"How transient and insignificant one feels among these mountains! They could not have looked very different on the morning when Adam first saw Eve."

"They are indeed superb," replied Burt, "and I am glad my home — our home — is among them; and yet I am sure that Adam would have found Eve more attractive than all the mountains in the world, just as I find your face, flushed by the morning air, far more interesting than these hills that I have known and loved so long."

"My face is a novelty, brother Burt," she answered, with deepening color, for the young fellow's frequent glances of admiration were slightly embarrassing.

"Strange to say, it is growing so familiar that I seem to have known you all my life," he responded, with a touch of tenderness in his tone.

"That is because I am your sister," she said, quietly. "Both the word and the relation suggest the idea that we have grown up together," and then she changed the subject so decidedly that even impetuous Burt felt that he must be more prudent in expressing the interest which daily grew stronger. As they were skirting Constitution Island Amy exclaimed:

"What a quaint old house! Who lives there all alone?"

"Some one that you know about, I imagine. Have you ever read 'The Wide, Wide World'?"

"What girl has not?"

"Well, Miss Warner, the author of the book, resides there. The place has an historical interest also. Do you see those old walls? They were built over one hundred years ago. At the beginning of the Revolution the Continental authorities were stupid enough to spend considerable money, for that period, in the building of a fort on those rocks. Any one might have seen that the higher ground opposite, at West Point, commanded the position."

"No matter about the fort. Tell me of Miss Warner."

"Well, she and her sister spend their summers there, and are ever busy writing, I believe. I'll row you down in the spring after they return. They are not there in winter, I am told. I have no doubt that she will receive you kindly, and tell you all about herself."

"I shall not fail to remind you of your promise, and I don't believe she will resent a very brief call from one who longs to see her and speak with her. I am not curious about celebrities in general, but there are some writers whose words have touched my heart, and whom I would like to see and thank. Where are you going now?"

"I am going to show you West Point in its winter aspect. You will find it a charming place to visit occasionally, only you must not go so often as to catch the cadet fever."

"Pray what is that?"

"It is an acute attack of admiration for very young men of a military cut. I use the word cut advisedly, for these incipient soldiers look for all the world as if carved out of wood. They gradually get over their stiffness, however, and as officers usually have a fine bearing, as you may see if we meet any of them. I wish, though, that you could see a squad of 'plebes' drilling. They would provoke a grin on the face of old Melancholy himself."

"Where is the danger, then, of acute admiration?"

"Well, they improve, I suppose, and are said to be quite irresistible during the latter part of their course. You need not laugh. If you knew how many women — some of them old enough to be the boys' mothers — had succumbed, you would take my warning to heart."

"What nonsense! You are a little jealous of them, Burt."

"I should be indeed if you took a fancy to any of them."

"Well, I suppose that is one of the penalties of having brothers. Are all these houses officers' quarters?"

They had now left the ice, and were climbing the hill as he replied:

"No, indeed. This is Logtown — so named, I suppose, because in the earlier days of the post log huts preceded these small wooden houses. They are chiefly occupied by enlisted men and civilian employees. That large building is the band barracks. The officers' quarters, with a few exceptions, are just above the brow of the hill west and south of the plain."

In a few moments Amy saw the wide parade and drill ground, now covered with untrodden snow.

"What a strange formation of land, right in among the mountains!" she said.

"Yes," replied her companion. "Nature could not have designed a better place for a military school. It is very accessible, yet easily guarded, and the latter is an important point, for some of the cadets are very wild, and disposed towards larks."

"I imagine that they are like other young fellows. Were you a saint at college?"

"How can you think otherwise? There, just opposite to us, out on the plain, the evening parade takes place after the spring fairly opens. I shall bring you down to see it, and 'tis a pretty sight. The music also is fine. Oh, I shall be magnanimous, and procure you some introductions if you wish."

"Thank you. That will be the best policy. These substantial buildings on our right are the officers' quarters, I suppose?"

"Yes. That is the commandant's, and the one beyond it is the superintendent's. They are both usually officers of high rank, who have made an honorable record for themselves. The latter has entire charge of the post, and the position is a very responsible one; nor is it by any means a sinecure, for when the papers have nothing else to find fault with they pick at West Point."

"I should think the social life here would be very pleasant."

"It is, in many respects. Army ties beget a sort of comradeship which extends to the officers' wives. Frequent removal from one part of the country to another prevents anything like vegetating. The ladies, I am told, do not become overmuch engrossed in housekeeping, and acquire something of a soldier's knack of doing without many things which would naturally occupy their time and thought if they looked forward to a settled life. Thus they have more time for reading and society. Those that I have met have certainly been very bright and companionable, and many who in girlhood were accustomed to city luxury can tell some strange stories of their frontier life. There is one army custom which often bears pretty hard. Can you imagine yourself an officer's wife?"

"I'll try, if it will be of help to you."

"Then suppose you were nicely settled in one of those houses, your furniture arranged, carpets down, etc. Some morning you learn that an officer outranking your husband has been ordered here on duty. His first step may be to take possession of your house. Quarters are assigned in accordance with rank, and you would be compelled to gather up your household gods and take them to some smaller dwelling. Then your husband — how droll the word sounds ! — could compel some other officer, whom he outranked, to move. It would seem that the thing might go on indefinitely, and the coming of a new officer produce a regular 1st of May state of affairs."

" I perceive that you are slyly providing an antidote against the cadet fever. What large building is this ? "

" The cadet barracks. There are over two hundred young fellows in the building. They have to study, I can tell you, nor can they slip through here as some of us did at college. All must abide the remorseless examinations, and many drop out. There goes a squad to the riding hall. Would you like to see the drill and sabre practice ? "

Amy assenting, they soon reached the balcony overlooking the arena, and spent an amused half-hour. The horses were rather gay, and some were vicious, while the young girl's eyes seemed to have an inspiriting effect upon the riders. Altogether the scene was a lively one, and at times exciting. Burt then drove southward almost to Fort Montgomery, and returning skirted the West Point plain by the river road, pointing out objects of interest at almost every turn, and especially calling the attention of his companion to old Fort Putnam, which he assured her should be the scene of a family picnic on some bright summer day. Amy's wonder and delight scarcely knew bounds when from the north side of the plain she saw for the first time the wonderful gorge through which the river flows southward from Newburgh Bay — Mount Taurus and Breakneck on one side, and Cro' Nest and Storm King on the other. With a deep sigh of content she said,

" I'm grateful that my home is in such a region as this."

"I'm grateful too," the young fellow replied, looking at her and not at the scenery.

But she was too pre-occupied to give him much attention, and in less than half an hour Thunder's fleet steps carried them through what seemed a realm of enchantment, and they were at home. "Burt," she said, warmly, "I never had such a drive before. I have enjoyed every moment."

"Ditto, ditto," he cried, merrily, as the horse dashed off with him towards the barn.

CHAPTER X.

A WINTER THUNDER-STORM.

EVEN before the return of Burtis and Amy the sun had been obscured by a fast-thickening haze, and while the family was at dinner the wind began to moan and sigh around the house in a way that foretold a storm.

"I fear we shall lose our sleighing," old Mr. Clifford remarked, "for all the indications now point to a warm rain."

His prediction was correct. Great masses of vapor soon came pouring over Storm King, and the sky grew blacker every moment. The wind blew in strong, fitful gusts, and yet the air was almost sultry. By four o'clock the rain began to dash with almost the violence of a summer shower against the window-panes of Mr. and Mrs. Clifford's sitting-room, and it grew so dark that Amy could scarcely see to read the paper to the old gentleman. Suddenly she was startled by a flash, and she looked up inquiringly for an explanation.

"You did not expect to see a thunder-storm almost in midwinter?" said Mr. Clifford, with a smile. "This unusual sultriness is producing unseasonable results."

"Is not a thunder-storm at this season very rare?" she asked.

"Yes; and yet some of the sharpest lightning I have ever seen has occurred in winter."

A heavy rumble in the southwest was now heard, and the interval between the flash and the report indicated that the storm centre was still distant. "I would advise you to go up to Maggie's room," resumed Mr. Clifford, "for from her south and west windows you may witness a scene that you will not soon forget. You are not afraid, are you?"

"No, not unless there is danger," she replied, hesitatingly.

"I have never been struck by lightning," the old man remarked, with a smile, "and I have passed through many storms. Come, I'll go with you. I never tire of watching the effects down among the mountains."

They found Mrs. Leonard placidly sewing, with Johnnie and Ned playing about the room. "You, evidently, are not afraid," said Amy.

"Oh no!" she replied. "I have more faith in the presence of little children than in the protection of lightning-rods. Yes, you may come in," she said to Webb, who stood at the door. "I suppose you think my sense of security has a very unscientific basis?"

"There are certain phases of credulity that I would not disturb for the world," he answered; "and who knows but you are right? What's more, your faith is infectious; for, whatever reason might tell me, I should still feel safer in a wild storm with the present company around me. Don't you think it odd, Amy, that what we may term natural feeling gets the better of the logic of the head? If that approaching storm should pass directly over us, with thickly flying bolts, would you not feel safer here?"

"Yes."

Webb laughed in his low, peculiar way, and murmured, "What children an accurate scientist would call us!"

"In respect to some things I never wish to grow up," she replied.

"I believe I can echo that wish. The outlook is growing fine, isn't it?"

The whole sky, which in the morning had smiled so brightly in undimmed sunshine, was now black with clouds. These hung so low that the house seemed the centre of a narrow and almost opaque horizon. The room soon darkened with the gloom of twilight, and the faces of the inmates faded into shadowy outlines. The mountains, half wrapped in vapor, loomed vast and indefinite in the obscurity. Every moment the storm grew nearer, and its centre was marked by an ominous blackness which the momentary flashes left all the more intense. The young girl grew deeply absorbed in the scene, and to Webb the strong, pure profile of her awed face, as the increasingly vivid flashes revealed it, was far more attractive than the landscape without, which was passing with swift alternations from ghastly gloom to even more ghastly pallor. He looked at her; the rest looked at the storm, the children gathering like chickens under the mother's wing.

At last there came a flash that startled them all. The mountains leaped out of the darkness like great sheeted spectres, and though seen but a second, they made so strong an impression that they seemed to have left their solid bases and to be approaching in the gloom. Then came a magnificent peal that swept across the whole southern arch of the sky. The reverberations among the hills were deep, long, and grand, and the fainter echoes had not died away before there was another flash — another thunderous report, which, though less loud than the one that preceded it, maintained the symphony with scarcely diminished grandeur.

"This is our Highland music, Amy," Webb remarked, as soon as he could be heard. "It has begun early this season, but you will hear much of it before the year is out."

"It is rather too sublime for my taste," replied the young girl, shrinking closer to Mr. Clifford's side.

"You are safe, my child," said the old man, encircling her with his arm.

"Let me also re-assure you in my prosaic way," Webb continued. "There, do you not observe that though this last flash seemed scarcely less vivid, the report followed more tardily, indicating that the storm centre is already well to the south and east of us? The next explosion will take place over the mountains beyond the river. You may now watch the scene in security, for the heavenly artillery is pointed away from you."

"Thank you. I must admit that your prose is both re-assuring and inspiring. How one appreciates shelter and home on such a night as this! Hear the rain splash against the window! Every moment the air seems filled with innumerable gems as the intense light pierces them. Think of being out alone on the river, or up there among the hills, while Nature is in such an awful mood! — the snow, the slush, everything dripping, the rain rushing down like a cataract, and thunder-bolts playing over one's head. In contrast, look around this home-like room.

A WINTER THUNDER-STORM.

Dear old father's serene face" — for Mr. Clifford had already taught her to call him father — "makes the Divine Fatherhood seem more real. Innocent little Ned here does indeed seem a better protection than a lightning-rod, while Johnnie, putting her doll to sleep in the corner, is almost absolute assurance of safety. Your science is all very well, Webb, but the heart demands something as well as the head. Oh, I wish all the world had such shelter as I have to-night!"

It was not often that Amy spoke so freely and impulsively. Like many with delicate organizations, she was excited by the electrical condition of the air. The pallor of awe had given place to a joyous flush, and her eyes were brilliant.

"Sister Amy," said Webb, as they went down to supper, "you must be careful of yourself, and others must be careful of you, for you have not much *vis inertiæ*. Some outside influences might touch you, as I would touch your piano, and make sad discord."

"Should I feel very guilty because I have not more of that substantial quality which can only find adequate expression in Latin?" she asked, with a humorous glance.

"Oh no! At least not in my opinion. I much prefer a woman in whom the spirit is pre-eminent over the clay. We are all made of dust, you know, and we men, I fear, often smack of the soil too strongly; therefore we are best pleased with contrasts. Moreover, our country life will brace you without blunting your nature. I should be sorry for you, though, if you were friendless, and had to face the world alone."

"That can scarcely happen now," she said, with a grateful glance.

During the early part of the evening they all became absorbed in a story, which Webb read aloud. At last Mr. Clifford rose, drew aside the curtains, and looked out. "Come here, Amy," he said. "Look where the storm thundered a few hours since!"

The sky was cloudless, the winds were hushed, the stars shining, and the mountains stood out gray and serene in the light of the rising moon.

"See, my child, the storm has passed utterly away, and everything speaks of peace and rest. In my long life I have had experiences which at the time seemed as dark and threatening as the storm that awed you in the early evening, but they passed also, and a quiet like that which reigns without followed. Put the lesson away in your heart, my dear; but may it be long before you have occasion for its use! Good-night."

CHAPTER XI.

NATURE UNDER GLASS.

THE next morning Amy asked Mrs. Clifford to initiate her more fully into the mysteries of her flowers, promising under her direction to assume their care in part. The old lady welcomed her assistance cordially, and said, "You could not take your lesson on a more auspicious occasion, for Webb has promised to aid me in giving my pets a bath to-day, and he can explain many things better than I can."

Webb certainly did not appear averse to the arrangement, and all three were soon busy in the flower-room. "You see," resumed Mrs. Clifford, "I use the old-fashioned yellow pots. I long ago gave up all the glazed, ornamental affairs with which novices are tempted, learning from experience that they are a delusion and a snare. Webb has since made it clear to me that the roots need a circulation of air and a free exhalation of moisture as truly as the leaves, and that since glazed pots do not permit this, they should never be employed. After all, there is nothing neater than these common yellow porous pots. I always select the yellowest ones, for they are the most porous. Those that are red are hard-baked, and are almost as bad as the glazed abominations, which once cost me some of my choice favorites."

"I agree with you. The glazed pots are too artificial to be associated with flowers. They suggest veneer, and I don't like veneer," Amy replied. Then she asked Webb: "Are you ready for a fire of questions? Any one with your ability should be able to talk and work at the same time."

"Yes; and I did not require that little diplomatic pat on the back."

"I'll be as direct and severe as an inquisitor, then. Why do you syringe and wash the foliage of the plants? Why will not simple watering of the earth in the pots answer?"

"We wash the foliage in order that the plants may breathe and digest their food."

"How lucid!" said Amy, with laughing irony. "Then," she added, "please take nothing for granted except my ignorance in these matters. I don't know anything about plants except in the most general way."

"Give me time, and I think I can make some things clear. A plant breathes as truly as you do, only unlike yourself it has indefinite thousands of mouths. There is one leaf on which there are over one hundred and fifty thousand. They are called *stomata*, or breathing-pores, and are on both sides of the leaf in most plants, but usually are in far greater abundance on the lower side. The plant draws its food from the air and soil — from the latter in liquid form — and this substance must be concentrated and assimilated. These little pores introduce the vital atmosphere through the air-passages of the plant, which correspond in a certain sense to the throat and lungs of an animal. You would be sadly off if you couldn't breathe; these plants would fare no better. Therefore we must do artificially what the rain does out-of-doors — wash away the accumulated dust, so that respiration may be unimpeded. Moreover, these little pores, which are shaped like the semi-elliptical springs of a carriage, are self-acting valves. A plant exhales a great deal of moisture in invisible vapor. A sunflower has been known to give off three pounds of water in twenty-four hours. This does no harm, unless the moisture escapes faster than it rises from the roots, in which case the plant wilts, and may even die. In such emergencies these little stomata, or mouths, shut up partly or completely, and so do much to check the exhalation. When moisture is given to the roots, these mouths open again, and if our eyes were fine enough we should see the vapor passing out."

"I never appreciated the fact before that plants are so thoroughly alive."

"Indeed, they are alive, and therefore they need the intelligent care required by all living creatures which we have removed from their natural conditions. Nature takes care of her children when they are where she placed them. In a case like this, wherein we are preserving plants that need summer warmth through a winter cold, we must learn to supply her place, and as far as possible adopt her methods. It is just because multitudes do not understand her ways that so many house plants are in a half-dying condition."

"Now, Amy, I will teach you how to water the pots," Mrs. Clifford began. "The water, you see, has been standing in the flower-room all night, so as to raise its temperature. That drawn directly from the well would be much too cold, and even as it is I shall add some warm water to take the chill off. The roots are very sensitive to a sudden chill from too cold water. No, don't pour it into the pots from that pitcher. The rain does not fall so, and, as Webb says, we must imitate nature. This watering-pot with a fine rose will enable you to sprinkle them slowly, and the soil can absorb the moisture naturally and equally. Most plants need water much as we take our food, regularly, often, and not too much at a time. Let this surface soil in the pots be your guide. It should never be perfectly dry, and still less should it be sodden with moisture; nor should moisture ever stand in the saucers under the pots, unless the plants are semi-aquatic, like this calla-lily. You will gradually learn to treat each plant or family of plants according to its nature. The amount of water which that calla requires would kill this heath, and the quantity needed by the heath would be the death of that cactus over there."

"Oh dear!" cried Amy, "if I were left alone in the care of your flower-room, I should out-Herod Herod in the slaughter of the innocents."

"You will not be left alone, and you will be surprised to find how quickly the pretty mystery of life and growth will begin to reveal itself to you."

As the days passed, Amy became more and more absorbed in the genial family life of the Cliffords. She especially attached herself to the old people, and Mr. and Mrs. Clifford were fast learning that their kindness to the orphan was destined to receive an exceeding rich reward. Her young eyes supplemented theirs, which were fast growing dim; and even platitudes read in her sweet girlish voice seemed to acquire point and interest. She soon learned to glean from the papers and periodicals that which each cared for, and to skip the rest. She discovered in the library a well-written book on travel in the tropics, and soon had them absorbed in its pages, the descriptions being much enhanced in interest by contrast with the winter landscape outside. Mrs. Clifford had several volumes on the culture of flowers, and under her guidance and that of Webb she began to prepare for the practical out-door work of spring with great zest. In the meantime she was assiduous in the care of the house plants, and read all she could find in regard to the species and varieties represented in the little flower-room. It became a source of genuine amusement to start with a familiar house plant and trace out all its botanical relatives, with their exceedingly varied character and yet essential consanguinity; and she drew others, even Alf and little Johnnie, into this unhackneyed pursuit of knowledge.

"These plant families," she said one day, "are as curiously diverse as human families. Group them together and you can see plainly that they belong to one another, and yet they differ so widely."

"As widely as Webb and I," put in Burt.

"Thanks for so apt an illustration."

"Burt is what you would call a rampant grower, running more to wood and foliage than anything else," Leonard remarked.

"I didn't say that," said Amy. "Moreover, I learned from my reading that many of the strong-growing plants become in maturity the most productive of flowers or fruit."

"How young I must seem to you!" Burt remarked.

"Well, don't be discouraged. It's a fault that will mend every day," she replied, with a smile that was so arch and genial that he mentally assured himself that he never would be disheartened in his growing purpose to make Amy more than a sister.

CHAPTER XII.

A MOUNTAINEER'S HOVEL.

ONE winter noon Leonard returned from his superintendence of the wood-cutting in the mountains. At the dinner-table he remarked: "I have heard to-day that the Lumley family are in great destitution, as usual. It is useless to help them, and yet one cannot sit down to a dinner like this in comfort while even the Lumleys are hungry."

"Hunger is their one good trait," said Webb. "Under its incentive they contribute the smallest amount possible to the world's work."

"I shouldn't mind," resumed Leonard, "if Lumley and his wife were pinched sharply. Indeed, it would give me solid satisfaction had I the power to make those people work steadily for a year, although they would regard it as the worst species of cruelty. They have a child, however, I am told, and for its sake I must go and see after them. Come with me, Amy, and I promise that you will be quite contented when you return home."

It was rather late in the afternoon when the busy Leonard appeared at the door in his strong one-horse sleigh with its movable seat, and Amy found that he had provided an ample store of vegetables, flour, etc. She started upon the expedition with genuine zest, to which every mile of progress added.

The clouded sky permitted only a cold gray light, in which everything stood out with wonderful distinctness. Even the dried weeds with their shrivelled seed-vessels were sharply defined against the snow. The beech leaves which still clung to the trees were bleached and white, but the foliage on the lower branches of the oaks was almost black against the hillside. Not a breath of air rustled them. At times Leonard would stop his horse, and when the jingle of the sleigh-bells ceased the silence was profound. Every vestige of life had disappeared in the still woods, or was hidden by the snow.

"How lonely and dreary it all looks!" said Amy, with a sigh.

"That is why I like to look at a scene like this," Leonard replied. "When I get home I see it all again — all its cold desolation — and it makes Maggie's room, with her and the children around me, seem like heaven."

But oh, the contrast to Maggie's room that Amy looked upon after a ride over a wood-road so rough that even the deep snow could not relieve its rugged inequalities! A dim glow of fire-light shone through the frosted window-panes of a miserable dwelling, as they emerged in the twilight from the narrow track in the growing timber. In response to a rap on the door, a gruff, thick voice said, "Come in."

Leonard, with a heavy basket on his arm, entered, followed closely by Amy, who, in her surprise, looked with undisguised wonder at the scene before her. Never had she even imagined such a home. Indeed, it seemed like profanation of the word to call the bare, uncleanly room by that sweetest of English words. It contained not a home-like feature. Her eyes were not resting on decent poverty, but upon uncouth, repulsive want; and this awful impoverishment was not seen in the few articles of cheap, dilapidated furniture so clearly as in the dull, sodden faces of the man and woman who kennelled there. No trace of manhood or womanhood was visible — and no animal is so repulsive as a man or woman imbruted.

The man rose unsteadily to his feet and said: "Evenin', Mr. Clifford. Will yer take a cheer?"

The woman had not the grace or the power to acknowledge their presence, but after staring stolidly for a moment or two at her visitors through her dishevelled hair, turned and cowered over the hearth again, her elfish locks falling forward and hiding her face.

The wretched smoky fire they maintained was the final triumph and revelation of their utter shiftlessness. With square miles of woodland all about them, they had prepared no billets of suitable size. The man had merely cut down two small trees, lopped off their branches, and dragged them into the room. Their butt-ends were placed together on the hearth, whence the logs stretched like the legs of a compass to the two farther corners of the room. Amy, in the uncertain light, had nearly stumbled over one of them. As the logs burned away they were shoved together on the hearth from time to time, the woman mechanically throwing on dry sticks from a pile near her when the green wood ceased to blaze. Both man and woman were partially intoxicated, and the latter was so stupefied as to be indifferent to the presence of strangers. While Leonard was seeking to obtain from the man some intelligible account of their condition, and bringing in his gifts, Amy gazed around, with her fair young face full of horror and disgust. Then her attention was arrested by a feeble cry from a cradle in a dusky corner beyond the woman, and to the girl's heart it was indeed a cry of distress, all the more pathetic because of the child's helplessness, and unconsciousness of the wretched life to which it seemed inevitably destined.

She stepped to the cradle's side, and saw a pallid little creature, puny and feeble from neglect. Its mother paid no attention to its wailing, and when Amy asked if she might take it up, the woman's mumbled reply was unintelligible.

After hesitating a moment Amy lifted the child, and found it scarcely more than a little skeleton. Sitting down on the only chair in the room, which the man had vacated — the woman crouched on an inverted box — Amy said, "Leonard, please bring me the milk we brought."

After it had been warmed a little the child drank it with avidity. Leonard stood in the background and sadly shook his head as he watched the scene, the fire-light flickering on Amy's pure profile and tear-dimmed eye as she watched the starved babe taking from her hand the food that the brutish mother on the opposite side of the hearth was incapable of giving it.

He never forgot that picture — the girl's face beautiful with a divine compassion, the mother's large sensual features half hidden by her snaky locks as she leaned stupidly over the fire, the dusky flickering shadows that filled the room, in which the mountaineer's head loomed like that of a shaggy beast. Even his rude nature was impressed, and he exclaimed,

"Gad! the likes of that was never seen in these parts afore!"

"Oh, sir," cried Amy, turning to him, "can you not see that your little child is hungry?"

"Well, —— the woman, she's drunk, and s'pose I be too, somewhat."

"Come, Lumley, be more civil," said Leonard. "The young lady isn't used to such talk."

"Oh, it all seems so dreadful!" exclaimed Amy, her tears falling faster.

The man drew a step or two nearer, and looked at her wonderingly; then, stretching out his great grimy hand, he said: "I s'pose you think I hain't no feelings, miss, but I have. I'll take keer on the young un, and I won't tech another drop to-night. Thar's my hand on it."

To Leonard's surprise, Amy took the hand, as she said, "I believe you will keep your word."

"That's right, Lumley," added Leonard, heartily. "Now you are acting like a man. I've brought you a fair lot of things, but they are in trade. In exchange for them I want the jug of liquor you brought up from the village to-day."

The man hesitated, and looked at his wife.

"Come, Lumley, you've begun well. Put temptation out of the way. For your wife and baby's sake, as well as your own, give me the jug. You mean well, but you know your failing."

"Well, Mr. Clifford," said the man, going to a cupboard, "I guess it'll be safer. But you don't want the darned stuff," and he opened the door and dashed the vessel against an adjacent bowlder.

"That's better still. Now brace up, get your axe and cut some wood in a civilized way. We're going to have a cold night. You can't keep up a fire with this shiftless contrivance," indicating with his foot one of the logs lying along the floor. "As soon as you get things straightened up here a little we'll give you work. The young lady has found out that you have the making of a man in you yet. If she'll take your word for your conduct to-night, she also will for the future."

"Yes," added Amy, "if you will try to do better, we will all try to help you. I shall come and see the baby again. Oh, Leonard," she added, as she placed the child in its cradle, "can't we leave one of the blankets from the sleigh? See, the baby has scarcely any covering."

"But you may be cold."

"No; I am dressed warmly. Oh! see! see! the little darling is smiling up at me! Leonard, please do. I'd rather be cold."

"Bless your good heart, miss!" said the man, more touched than ever. "Never had any sich wisitors afore."

When Amy had tucked the child in warm he followed her and Leonard to the sleigh and said, "Good-by, miss; I'm a-going to work like a man, and there's my hand on it agin."

Going to work was Lumley's loftiest idea of reformation, and many others would find it a very good beginning. As they drove away they heard the ring of his axe, and it had a hopeful sound.

For a time Leonard was closely occupied with the intricacies of the road, and when at last he turned and looked at Amy, she was crying.

"There, don't take it so to heart," he said, soothingly.

"Oh, Leonard, I never saw anything like it before. That poor little baby's smile went right to my heart. And to think of its awful mother!"

They paused on an eminence and looked back on the dim outline of the hovel. Then Leonard drew her close to him as he said, "Don't cry any more. You have acted like a true little woman — just as Maggie would have done — and good may come of it, although they'll always be Lumleys. As Webb says, it would require several generations to bring them up. Haven't I given you a good lesson in contentment?"

"Yes; but I did not need one. I'm glad I went, however, but feel that I cannot rest until there is a real change for the better."

"Well, who knows? You may bring it about."

The supper-table was waiting for them when they returned. The gleam of the crystal and silver, the ruddy glow from the open stove, the more genial light of every eye that turned to welcome them, formed a delightful counter-picture to the one they had just looked upon, and Leonard beamed with immeasurable satisfaction. To Amy the contrast was almost too sharp, and she could not dismiss from her thoughts the miserable dwelling in the mountains.

Leonard's buoyant, genial nature had been impressed, but not depressed, by the scene he had witnessed. Modes of life in the mountains were familiar to him, and with the consciousness of having done a kind deed from which further good might result, he was in a mood to speak freely of the Lumleys, and the story of their experience was soon drawn from him. Impulsive, warm-hearted Burt was outspoken in his admiration of Amy's part in the visit of charity, but Webb's intent look drew her eyes to him, and with a strange little thrill at her heart she saw that he had interpreted her motives and feelings.

"I will take you there again, Amy," was all he said, but for some reason she dwelt upon the tone in which he spoke more than upon all the uttered words of the others.

Later in the evening he joined her in the sitting-room, which, for the moment, was deserted by the others, and she spoke of the wintry gloom of the mountains, and how Leonard was fond of making the forbidding aspect a foil for Maggie's room. Webb smiled as he replied:

"That is just like Len. Maggie's room is the centre of his world, and he sees all things in their relation to it. I also was out this afternoon, and I took my gun, although I did not see a living thing to fire at. But the 'still, cold woods,' as you term them, were filled with a beauty and suggestiveness of which I was never conscious before. I remembered how different they had appeared in past summers and autumns, and I saw how ready they were for the marvellous changes that will take place in a few short weeks. The hillsides seemed like canvases on which an artist had drawn his few strong outlines which foretold the beauty to come so perfectly that the imagination supplied it."

"Why, Webb, I did not know you had so much imagination."

"Nor did I, and I am glad that I am discovering traces of it. I have always loved the mountains, because so used to them — they were a part of my life and surroundings — but never before this winter have I realized they were so beautiful. When I found that you were going up among the hills, I thought I would go also, and then we could compare our impressions."

"It was all too dreary for me," said the young girl, in a low tone. "It reminded me of the time when my old life ceased, and this new life had not begun. There were weeks wherein my heart was oppressed with a cold, heavy despondency, when I just wished to be quiet, and try not to think at all, and it seemed to me that nature looked to-day just as I felt."

"I think it very sad that you have learned to interpret nature in this way so early in life. And yet I think I can understand you and your analogy."

"I think you can, Webb," she said, simply.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALMOST A TRAGEDY.

THE quiet sequence of daily life was soon interrupted by circumstances that nearly ended in a tragedy. One morning Burt saw an eagle sailing over the mountains. The snow had been greatly wasted, and in most places was so strongly incrusted that it would bear a man's weight. Therefore the conditions seemed favorable for the eagle hunt which he had promised himself; and having told his father that he would look after the wood teams and men on his way, he took his rifle and started.

The morning was not cold, and not a breath of air disturbed the sharp, still outlines of the leafless trees. The sky was slightly veiled with a thin scud of clouds. As the day advanced these increased in density and darkened in hue.

Webb remarked at dinner that the atmosphere over the Beacon Hills in the northeast was growing singularly obscure and dense in its appearance, and that he believed a heavy storm was coming.

"I am sorry Burt has gone to the mountains to-day," said Mrs. Clifford, anxiously.

"Oh, don't worry about Burt,' was Webb's response; "there is no more danger of his being snowed in than of a fox's."

Before the meal was over, the wind, snow-laden, was moaning about the house. With every hour the gale increased in intensity. Early in the afternoon the men with the two teams drove to the barn. Amy could just see their white, obscure figures through the blinding snow. Even old Mr. Clifford went out to question them. "Yes, Mr. Burt come up in de mawnin' an' stirred us all up right smart, slashed down a tree hisself to show a new gawky hand dat's cuttin' by de cord how to 'arn his salt; den he put out wid his rafle in a bee-line towards de riber. Dat's de last we seed ob him;" and Abram went stolidly on to unhitch and care for his horses.

Mr. Clifford and his two elder sons returned to the house with traces of anxiety on their faces, while Mrs. Clifford was so worried that, supported by Amy, she made an unusual effort, and met them at the door.

"Don't be disturbed, mother," said Webb, confidently. "Burt and I have often been caught in snow-storms, but never had any difficulty in finding our way. Burt will soon appear, or, if he doesn't, it will be because he has stopped to recount to Dr. Marvin the results of his eagle hunt."

Indeed, they all tried to re-assure her, but, with woman's quick instinct where her affections are concerned, she read what was passing in their minds. Her husband led her back to her couch, where she lay with her large dark eyes full of trouble, while her lips often moved in prayer. The thought of her youngest and darling son far off and alone among those cloud-capped and storm-beaten mountains was terrible to her.

Another hour passed, and still the absent youth did not return. Leonard, his father, and Amy, often went to the hall window and looked out. The storm so enhanced the early gloom of the winter afternoon that the out-buildings, although so near, loomed out only as shadows. The wind was growing almost fierce in its violence. Webb had so long kept up his pretence of reading that Amy began in her thoughts to resent his seeming indifference as cold-blooded. At last he laid down his book, and went quietly away. She followed him, for it seemed to her that something ought to be done, and that he was the one to do it. She found him in an upper chamber, standing by an open window that faced the mountains. Joining him, she was appalled by the roar of the wind as it swept down from the wooded heights.

"Oh, Webb," she exclaimed — he started at her words and presence, and quickly closed the window — "ought not something to be done? The bare thought that Burt is lost in this awful gloom fills me with horror. The sound of that wind was like the roar of the ocean in a storm we had. How can he see in such blinding snow? How could he breast this gale if he were weary?"

He was silent a moment, looking with contracted brows at the gloomy scene. At last he began, as if re-assuring himself as well as the agitated girl at his side:

"Burt, you must remember, has been brought up in this region. He knows the mountains well, and — "

"Oh, Webb, you take this matter too coolly," interrupted Amy, impulsively. "Something tells me that Burt is in danger;" and in her deep solicitude she put her hand on his arm. She noticed that it trembled, and that he still bent the same contracted brow towards the region where his brother must be if her fears were true. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

"Yes," he said, quietly, "I take it coolly. Perhaps it's well that I can. You may be right, and there may be need of prompt, wise action. If so, a man will need the full control of all his wits. I will not, however, give up my hope — my almost belief — that he is at Dr. Marvin's. I shall satisfy myself at once. Try not to show your fears to father and mother, that's a brave girl."

He was speaking hurriedly now as they were descending the stairs. He found his father in the hall, much disturbed, and querying with his eldest son as to the advisability of taking some steps immediately. Leonard, although evidently growing anxious, still urged that Burt, with his knowledge and experience as a sportsman, would not permit himself to be caught in such a storm.

"He surely must be at the house of Dr. Marvin or some other neighbor on the mountain road."

"I also think he is at the doctor's, but shall see," Webb remarked, quietly, as he drew on his overcoat.

"I don't think he's there; I don't think he is at any neighbor's house," cried Mrs. Clifford, who, to the surprise of all, had made her way to the hall unaided. "Burt is thoughtless about little things, but he would not leave me in suspense on such a night as this."

"Mother, I promise you Burt shall soon be here safe and sound;" and Webb in his shaggy coat and furs went hastily out, followed by Leonard. A few moments later the dusky outlines of a man and a galloping horse appeared to Amy for a moment, and then vanished towards the road.

It was some time before Leonard returned, for Webb had said: "If Burt is not at the doctor's, we must go and look for him. Had you not better have the strongest wood-sled ready? You will know what to do."

Having admitted the possibility of danger, Leonard acted promptly. With Abram's help a pair of stout horses were soon attached to the sled, which was stored with blankets, shovels to clear away drifts, etc.

Webb soon came galloping back, followed a few moments later by the doctor, but there were no tidings of Burt.

Amy expected that Mrs. Clifford would become deeply agitated, but was mistaken. She lay on her couch with closed eyes, but her lips moved almost continuously. She had gone to Him whose throne is beyond all storms.

Mr. Clifford was with difficulty restrained from joining his sons in the search. The old habit of resolute action returned upon him, but Webb settled the question by saying, in a tone almost stern in its authority, "Father, you *must* remain with mother."

Amy had no further reason to complain that Webb took the matter too coolly. He was all action, but his movements were as deft as they were quick. In the basket which Maggie had furnished with brandy and food he placed the conch-shell used to summon Abram to his meals. Then, taking down a double-barrelled breech-loading gun, he filled his pocket with cartridges.

"What is that for?" Amy asked, with white lips, for, as he seemed the natural leader, she hovered near him.

"If we do not find him at one of the houses well up on the mountain, as I hope we shall, I shall fire repeatedly in our search. The reports would be heard farther than any other sound, and he might answer with his rifle."

Leonard now entered with the doctor, who said, "All ready; we have stored the sledge with abundant material for fires, and if Burt has met with an accident, I am prepared to do all that can be done under the circumstances."

"All ready," responded Webb, again putting on his coat and fur cap.

Amy sprang to his side and tied the cap securely down with her scarf.

"Forgive me," she whispered, "for saying that you took Burt's danger coolly. I understand you better now. Oh, Webb, be careful! Think of yourself too. I now see that you are thinking of Burt only."

"Of you also, little sister, and I shall be the stronger for such thoughts. Don't give way to fear. We shall find Burt, and all come home hungry as wolves. Good-by."

"May the blessing of Him who came to seek and save the lost go with you!" said the aged father, tremulously.

A moment later they dashed away, followed by Burt's hound and the watch-dog, and the darkness and storm hid them from sight.

Oh, the heavy cross of watching and waiting! Many claim that woman is not the equal of man because she must watch and wait in so many of the dread emergencies of life, forgetting that it is infinitely easier to act, to face the wildest storm that sweeps the sky or the deadliest hail crashing from cannons' mouths, than to sit down in sickening suspense waiting for the blow to fall. The man's duty requires chiefly the courage which he shares with the greater part of the brute creation, and only as he adds woman's patience, fortitude, and endurance does he become heroic. Nothing but his faith in God and his life-long habit of submission to his will kept Mr. Clifford from chafing like a caged lion in his enforced inaction. Mrs. Clifford, her mother's heart yearning after her youngest and darling boy with an infinite tenderness, alone was calm.

Amy's young heart was oppressed by an unspeakable dread. It was partly due to the fear and foreboding of a child to whom the mountains were a Siberia-like wilderness in their awful obscurity, and still more the result of knowledge of the sorrow that death involves. The bare possibility that the light-hearted, ever-active Burt, who sometimes perplexed her with more than fraternal devotion, was lying white and still beneath the drifting snow, or even wandering helplessly in the blinding gale, was so terrible that it blanched her cheek, and made her lips tremble when she tried to speak. She felt that she had been a little brusque to him at times, and now she reproached herself in remorseful compunction, and with the abandonment of a child to her present overwrought condition, felt that she could never refuse him anything should his blue eyes turn pleadingly to her again. At first she did not give way, but was sustained, like Maggie, by the bustle of preparation for the return, and in answering the innumerable questions of Johnnie and Alf. Webb's assurance to his mother that he would bring Burt back safe and sound was her chief hope. From the first moment of greeting he had inspired her with a confidence that had steadily increased, and from the time that he had admitted the possibility of this awful emergency he had acted so resolutely and wisely as to convince her that all that man could do would be done. She did not think of explaining to herself why her hope centred more in him than in all the others engaged in the search, or why she was more solicitous about him in the hardships and perils that the expedition involved, and yet Webb shared her thoughts almost equally with Burt. If the latter were reached, Webb would be the rescuer, but her sickening dread was that in the black night and howling storm he could not be found.

As the rescuing party pushed their way up the mountain with difficulty they became more and more exposed to the northeast gale, and felt with increasing dread how great was the peril to which Burt must be exposed had he not found refuge in some of the dwellings nearer to the scene of his sport. The roar of the gale up the rugged defile was perfectly terrific, and the snow caught up from the overhanging ledges was often driven into their faces with blinding force. They could do little better than give the horses their heads, and the poor brutes floundered slowly through the drifts. The snow had deepened incredibly fast, and the fierce wind piled it up so fantastically in every sheltered place that they were often in danger of upsetting, and more than once had to spring out with their shovels. At last, after an hour of toil, they reached the first summit, but no tidings could be obtained of Burt from the people residing in the vicinity. They therefore pushed on towards the gloomy wastes beyond, and before long left behind them the last dwelling and the last chance that he had found shelter before night set in. Two stalwart men had joined them in the search, however, and formed a welcome re-inforcement. With terrible forebodings they pressed forward, Webb firing his breech-loader rapidly, and the rest making what noise they could, but the gale swept away these feeble sounds, and merged them almost instantly in the roar of the tempest. It was their natural belief that in attempting to reach home Burt would first try to gain the West Point road that crossed the mountains, for here would be a pathway that the snow could not obliterate, and also his best chance of meeting a rescuing party. It was therefore their purpose to push on until the southern slope of Cro' Nest was reached, but they became so chilled and despondent over their seemingly impossible task that they stopped on an eminence near a rank of wood. They knew that the outlook commanded a wide view to the south and north, and that if Burt were cowering somewhere in that region, it would be a good point from which to attract his attention.

"I move that we make a fire here," said Leonard. "Abram is half-frozen, we are all chilled to the bone, and the horses need rest. I think, too, that a fire can be seen farther than any sound can be heard."

The instinct of self-preservation caused them all to accede, and, moreover, they must keep up themselves in order to accomplish anything. They soon had a roaring blaze under the partial shield of a rock, while at the same time the flames rose so high as to be seen on both sides of the ridge as far as the storm permitted. The horses were sheltered as well as possible, and heavily blanketed. As the men thawed out their benumbed forms, Webb exclaimed, "Great God! what chance has Burt in such a storm? and what chance have we of finding him?"

The others shook their heads gloomily, but answered nothing.

"It will kill mother," he muttered.

"There is no use in disguising the truth," said the doctor, slowly. "If Burt's alive, he must have a fire. Our best chance is to see that. But how can one see anything through this swirl of snow, that is almost as thick in the air as on the ground?"

To their great joy the storm soon began to abate, and the wind to blow in gusts. They clambered to the highest point near them, and peered eagerly for some glimmer of light; but only a dim, wild scene, that quickly shaded off into utter obscurity, was around them. The snow-flakes were growing larger, however, and were no longer swept with a cutting slant into their faces.

"Thank God!" cried Webb, "I believe the gale is nearly blown out. I shall follow this ridge towards the river as far as I can."

"I'll go with you," said the doctor, promptly.

"No," said Webb; "it will be your turn next. It won't do for us all to get worn out together. I'll go cautiously; and with this ridge as guide, and the fire, I can't lose my way. I'll take one of the dogs, and fire my gun about every ten minutes. If I fire twice in succession, follow me; meanwhile give a blast on the conch every few moments;" and with these words he speedily disappeared.

The doctor and Leonard returned to the fire, and watched the great flakes fall hissing into the flames. Hearing of Webb's expedition, the two neighbors who had recently joined them pushed on up the road, shouting and blowing the conch-shell as often as they deemed it necessary. Their signal also was to be two blasts should they meet with any success. Leonard and the doctor were a *corps de réserve.* The wind soon ceased altogether, and a stillness that was almost oppressive took the place of the thunder of the gale. They threw themselves down to rest, and Leonard observed with a groan how soon his form grew white. "Oh, doctor," he said, in a tone of anguish, "can it be that we shall never find Burt till the snow melts?"

"Do not take so gloomy a view," was the reply. "Burt must have been able to make a fire, and now that the wind has ceased we can attract his attention."

Webb's gun was heard from time to time, the sounds growing steadily fainter. At last, far away to the east, came two reports in quick succession. The two men started up, and with the aid of lanterns followed Webb's trail, Abram bringing up the rear with an axe and blankets.

Sometimes up to his waist in snow, sometimes springing from rock to rock that the wind had swept almost bare, Webb had toiled on along the broken ridge, his face scratched and bleeding from the shaggy, stunted trees that it was too dark to avoid; but he thought not of such trifles, and seemed endowed with a strength ten times his own. Every few moments he would stop, listen, and peer about him on every side. Finally, after a rather long upward climb, he knew he had reached a rock of some altitude. He again fired his gun. The echoes soon died away, and there was no sound except the low tinkle of the snowflakes through the bushes. He was just about to push on, when, far down to the right and south of him, he thought he saw a gleam of light. He looked long and eagerly, but in vain. He passed over to that side of the ridge, and fired again; but there was no response — nothing but the dim, ghostly snow on every side. Concluding that it had been but a trick of the imagination, he was about to give up the hope that had thrilled his heart, when feebly but unmistakably a ray of light shot up, wavered, and disappeared. At the same moment his dog gave a loud bark, and plunged down the ridge. A moment sufficed to give the preconcerted signal, and almost at the risk of life and limb Webb rushed down the precipitous slope. He had not gone very far before he heard a long, piteous howl that chilled his very soul with dread. He struggled forward desperately, and, turning the angle of a rock, saw a dying fire, and beside it a human form merely outlined through the snow. As the dog was again raising one of his ill-omened howls, Webb stopped him savagely, and sprang to the prostrate figure, whose face was buried in its arm.

It was Burt. Webb placed a hand that trembled like an aspen over his brother's heart, and with a loud cry of joy felt its regular beat. Burt had as yet only succumbed to sleep, which in such cases is fatal when no help interposes. Webb again fired twice to guide the rescuing party, and then with some difficulty caused Burt to swallow a little brandy. He next began to chafe his wrists with the spirits, to shake him, and to shout in his ear. Slowly Burt shook off his fatal lethargy, and by the time the rest of the party reached him, was conscious.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "did I go to sleep? I vowed I would not a hundred times. Nor would I if I could have moved around; but I've sprained my ankle, and can't walk."

With infinite difficulty, but with hearts light and grateful, they carried him on an improvised stretcher to the sled. Burt explained that he had been lured farther and farther away by a large eagle that had kept just out of range, and in his excitement he had at first paid no attention to the storm. Finally its increasing fury and the memory of his distance from home had brought him to his senses, and he had struck out for the West Point road. Still he had no fears or misgivings; but while climbing the slope on which he was found, he slipped, fell, and in trying to save himself came down with his whole weight on a loose stone, and sprained his left ankle. He tried to crawl and hobble forward, and for a time gave way to something like panic. He soon found that he was using up his strength, and that he would perish with the cold before he could make half a mile. He then crawled under the sheltering ledge where Webb discovered him, and by the aid of his good woodcraft soon had a fire, for it was his fortune to have some matches. A dead and partially decayed tree, a knife strong enough to cut the saplings when bent over, supplied him with fuel. Finally the drowsiness which long exposure to cold induces began to oppress him. He fought against it desperately for a time, but, as events proved, was overpowered.

"God bless you, Webb!" he said, concluding his story. "You have saved my life."

"We have all had a hand at it," was the quiet reply. "I couldn't have done anything alone."

Wrapped up beyond the possibility of further danger from the cold, and roused from time to time, Burt was carried homeward as fast as the drifts permitted, the horses' bells now chiming musically in the still air.

As hour after hour passed and there was nothing left to do, Amy took Johnnie on her lap, and they rocked back and forth and cried together. Soon the heavy lids closed over the little girl's eyes, and shut off the tears. Alf had already coiled up on a lounge and sobbed himself to sleep. Maggie took up the little girl, laid her down beside him, and covered them well from the draughts that the furious gale drove through every crack and cranny of the old house, glad that they had found a happy oblivion. Amy then crept to a footstool at Mrs. Clifford's side — the place where she had so often seen the youth whom the storm she now almost began to believe had swept from them forever — and she bowed her head on the old lady's thin hand and sobbed bitterly.

"Don't give way so, darling," said the mother, as her other hand stroked the brown hair. "God is greater than the storm. We have prayed, and we now feel that he will do what is best."

"Oh, that I had your faith!"

"It will come in time — when long years have taught you his goodness."

She slowly wiped her eyes, and stole a glance at Mr. Clifford. His earlier half-desperate restlessness had passed away, and he sat quietly in his chair gazing into the fire, occasionally wiping a tear from his eyes, and again looking upward with an expression of sublime submission. Soon, as if conscious of her wondering observation, he said, "Come to me, Amy."

She stood beside him, and he drew her close as he continued:

"My child, one of the hardest lessons we can learn in this world is to say, 'Not my will, but Thine be done.' I have lived fourscore years, and yet I could not say it at first; but now" (with a calm glance heavenward) "I can say, 'My Father, thy will be done.' If he takes Burt, he has given us you;" and he kissed her so tenderly that she bowed her head upon his shoulder, and said, brokenly,

"You are my father in very truth."

"Yes," was his quiet response.

Then she stole back to her seat. There was a Presence in the room that filled her with awe, and yet banished her former overwhelming dread and grief.

They watched and waited; there was no sound in the room except the soft crackle of the fire, and Amy thought deeply on the noble example before her of calm, trustful waiting. At last she became conscious that the house was growing strangely still; the faint tick of the great clock on the landing of the stairs struck her ear; the rush and roar of the wind had ceased. Bewildered, she rose softly and went to Maggie's room, and found that the tired mother in watching over her children had fallen asleep in her chair. She lifted a curtain, and could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw that the trees that had been writhing and moaning in the gale now stood white and spectral as the lamp-light fell upon them. When had the wind ceased? It seemed as if the calm that had fallen upon her spirit had extended to nature; that the storm had hushed its rude clamor even while it continued. From the window she watched the white flakes flutter through the light she knew not how long; the old clock chimed out midnight, and then, faint and far away, she thought she heard the sleigh-bells. With swift, silent tread, she rushed to a side door and threw it open. Yes, clear and distinct she now heard them on the mountain road. With a low cry she returned and wakened Maggie, then flew to the old people, and, with a voice that she tried in vain to steady, said, "They are coming."

Mr. Clifford started up, and was about to rush from the room, but paused a moment irresolutely, then returned, sat down by his wife, and put his arm around her. He was true to his first love. The invalid had grown faint and white, but his touch and presence were the cordials she needed.

Amy fled back to the side door, and the sled soon appeared. There was no light at this entrance, and she was unobserved. She saw them begin to lift some one out, and she dashed through an intervening drift nearly to her waist. Webb felt a hand close on his arm with a grip that he long remembered.

"Burt?" she cried, in a tone of agonized inquiry.

"Heigh-ho, Amy," said the much-muffled figure that they were taking from the sled; "I'm all right."

In strong re-action, the girl would have fallen, had not Webb supported her. He felt that she trembled and clung almost helplessly to him.

"Why, Amy," he said, gently, "you will take your death out here in the cold and snow;" and leaving the others to care for Burt, he lifted her in his arms and carried her in.

"Thank God, he's safe," she murmured. "Oh, we have waited so long! There, I'm better now," she said, hastily, and with a swift color coming into her pale cheeks, as they reached the door.

"You must not expose yourself so again, sister Amy."

"I thought — I thought when you began to lift Burt out —" But she could not finish the sentence.

"He has only sprained his ankle. Go tell mother."

Perhaps there is no joy like that which fills loving hearts when the lost is found. It is so pure and exalted that it is one of the ecstasies of heaven. It would be hard to describe how the old house waked up with its sudden accession of life — life that was so warm and vivid against the background of the shadow of death. There were murmured thanksgivings as feet hurried to and fro, and an opening fire of questions, which Maggie checked by saying:

"Possess your souls in patience. Burt's safe — that's enough to know until he is cared for, and my half-famished husband and the rest get their supper. Pretty soon we can all sit down, for I want a chance to hear too."

"And no one has a better right, Maggie," said her husband, chafing his hands over the fire. "After what we've seen to-night, this place is the very abode of comfort, and you its presiding genius;" and Leonard beamed and thawed until the air grew tropical around him.

At Mrs. Clifford's request (for it was felt that it was not best to cross the invalid), Burt, in the rocking-chair wherein he had been placed, was carried to her room, and received a greeting from his parents that brought tears to the young fellow's eyes. Dr. Marvin soon did all within his power at that stage for the sprained ankle and frost-bitten fingers, the mother advising, and feeling that she was still caring for her boy as she had done a dozen years before. Then Burt was carried back to the dining-room, where all were soon gathered. The table groaned under Maggie's bountiful provision, and lamp-light and fire-light revealed a group upon which fell the richer light of a great joy.

Burt was ravenously hungry, but the doctor put him on limited diet, remarking, "You can soon make up for lost time." He and Leonard, however, made such havoc that Amy pretended to be aghast; but she soon noted that Webb ate sparingly, that his face was not only scratched and torn, but almost haggard, and that he was unusually quiet. The reasons were soon apparent. When all were helped, and Maggie had a chance to sit down, she said:

"Now tell us about it. We just-heard enough when you first arrived to curdle our blood. How in the world, Burt, did you allow yourself to get caught in such a storm?"

"If it had not been for this confounded sprain I should have come out all right;" and then followed the details with which the reader is acquainted, although little could be got out of Webb.

"The upshot of it all is," said Leonard, as he beamed upon the party with ineffable content, "between mother's praying and Webb's looking, Burt is here, not much the worse for his eagle hunt."

They would not hear of the doctor's departure, and very soon afterwards old Mr. Clifford gathered them around the family altar in a thanksgiving prayer that moistened every eye.

Then all prepared for the rest so sorely needed. As Webb went to the hall to hang up his gun, Amy saw that he staggered in his almost mortal weariness, and she followed him.

"There are your colors, Amy," he said, laughingly, taking her scarf from an inner pocket. "I wore it till an envious scrub-oak tore it off. It was of very great help to me — the scarf, not the oak."

"Webb," she said, earnestly, "you can't disguise the truth from me by any such light words. You are half-dead from exhaustion. I've been watching you ever since your return. You are ill — you have gone beyond your strength, and in addition to it all I let you carry me in. Oh dear! I'm so worried about you!"

"It's wonderfully nice to have a little sister to worry about a fellow."

"But can't I do something for you? You've thought about everybody, and no one thinks for you."

"*You* have, and so have the rest, as far as there was occasion. Let me tell you how wan and weary you look. Oh, Amy, our home is so much more to us since you came!"

"What would our home be to us to-night, Webb, were it not for you! And I said you took Burt's danger too coolly. How I have reproached myself for those words! God bless you, Webb! you did not resent them; and you saved Burt;" and she impulsively put her arm around his neck and kissed him, then fled to her room.

The philosophical Webb might have had much to think about that night had he been in an analytical mood, for by some magic his sense of utter weariness was marvellously relieved. With a low laugh, he thought,

"I'd be tempted to cross the mountains again for such a reward."

CHAPTER XIV.

HINTS OF SPRING.

WHEN Amy awoke on the following morning she was almost dazzled, so brilliant was the light that flooded the room. Long, quiet sleep and the elasticity of youth had banished all depression from mind and body, and she sprang eagerly to the window that she might see the effects of the storm, expecting to witness its ravages on every side. Imagine her wonder and delight when, instead of wide-spread wreck and ruin, a scene of indescribable beauty met her eyes! The snow had draped all things in white. The trees that had seemed so gaunt and skeleton-like as they writhed and moaned in the gale were now clothed with a beauty surpassing that of their summer foliage, for every branch, even to the smallest twig, had been incased in the downy flakes. The evergreens looked like old-time gallants well powdered for a festival. The shrubbery of the garden was scarcely more than mounds of snow. The fences had almost disappeared; while away as far as the eye could reach all was sparkling whiteness. Nature was like a bride adorned for her nuptials. Under the earlier influences of the gale the snow had drifted here and there, making the undulations of her robe, and under the cloudless sun every crystal glittered, as if over all had been flung a profusion of diamond dust. Nor did she seem a cold, pallid bride without heart or gladness. Her breath was warm and sweet, and full of an indefinable suggestion of spring. She seemed to stand radiant in maidenly purity and loveliness, watching in almost breathless expectation the rising of the sun above the eastern mountains.

A happy group gathered at the breakfast-table that morning. Rest of mind and thankfulness of heart had conduced to refreshing repose, and the brightness of the new day was reflected in every face. Burt's ankle was painful, but this was a slight matter in contrast with what might have been his fate. He had insisted on being dressed and brought to the lounge in the breakfast-room. Webb seemed wonderfully restored, and Amy thought he looked almost handsome in his unwonted animation, in spite of the honorable scars that marked his face. Dr. Marvin exclaimed, exultingly,

"Miss Amy, you can begin the study of ornithology at once. There are bluebirds all about the house, and you have no idea what exquisite bits of color they are against the snow on this bright morning. After breakfast you must go out and greet these first arrivals from the South."

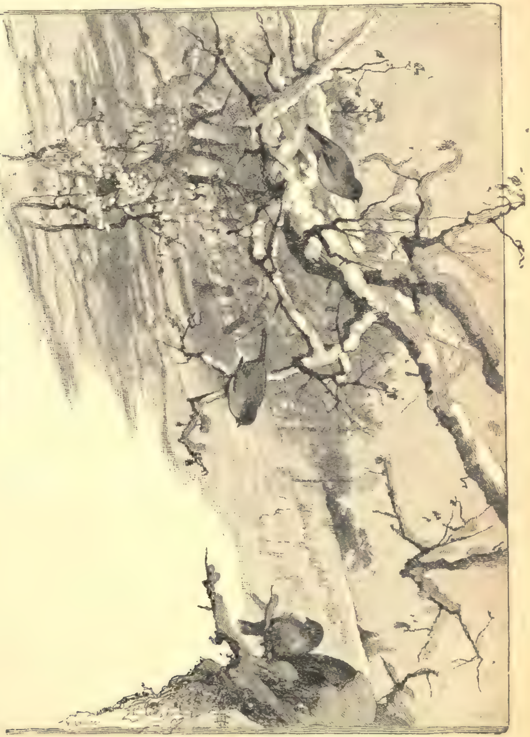
"Yes, Amy," put in Leonard, laughing, "it's a lovely morning for a stroll. The snow is only two feet deep, and drifted in many places higher than your head. The 'beautiful snow' brings us plenty of prose in the form of back-aching work with our shovels."

"No matter," said Webb; "it has also brought us warmth, exquisitely pure air, and a splendid covering for grass and grain that will be apt to last well into the spring. Anything rather than mud and the alternate freezing and thawing that are as provoking as a capricious friend."

"Why, Webb, what a burst of sentiment!" said Burt.

"Doctor, the bluebirds seem to come like the south wind that Leonard says is blowing this morning," Mrs. Clifford remarked. "Where were they last night? and how have they reached us after such a storm?"

"I imagine that those we hear this morning have been with us all winter, or they may have arrived before the storm. I scarcely remember a winter when I have not seen some around, and their instinct guides them where to find shelter. When the weather is very cold they are comparatively silent, but even



SPRING HERALDS.

a January thaw will make them tuneful. They are also migrants, and have been coming northward for a week or two past, and this accounts for the numbers this morning. Poor little things! they must have had a hard time of it last night, wherever they were."

"Oh, I do wish I could make them know how glad I'd be to take them in and keep them warm every cold night!" shy Johnnie whispered to Maggie.

"They have a better mother than even you could be," said the doctor, nodding at the little girl.

"Have all the bluebirds a mother?" she asked, with wondering eyes.

"Indeed they have, and all the other birds also, and this mother takes care of them the year round — Mother Nature, that's her name. Your heart may be big enough, but your house would not begin to hold all the bluebirds, so Mother Nature tells the greater part of them to go where it's warm about the 1st of December, and she finds them winter homes all the way from Virginia to Florida. Then towards spring she whispers when it is safe to come back, and if you want to see how she can take care of those that are here even during such a storm as that of last night, bundle up and come out on the sunny back piazza."

There all the household soon after assembled, the men armed with shovels to aid in the path-making in which Abram was already engaged. Burt was placed in a rocking-chair by a window that he might enjoy the prospect also. A charming winter outlook it was, brilliant with light and gemmed with innumerable crystals. To Amy's delight, she heard for the first time the soft, down-like notes of the bluebird. At first they seemed like mere "wandering voices in the air," sweet, plaintive, and delicate as the wind-swayed anemone. Then came a soft rustle of wings, and a bird darted downward, probably from the eaves, but seemingly it was a bit of the sky that had taken form and substance. He flew past her and dislodged a miniature avalanche from the spray on which he alighted. The little creature sat still a moment, then lifted and stretched one wing by an odd coquettish movement while it uttered its low musical warble.

"Why," exclaimed Amy, "he is almost the counterpart of our robin-redbreast of England!"

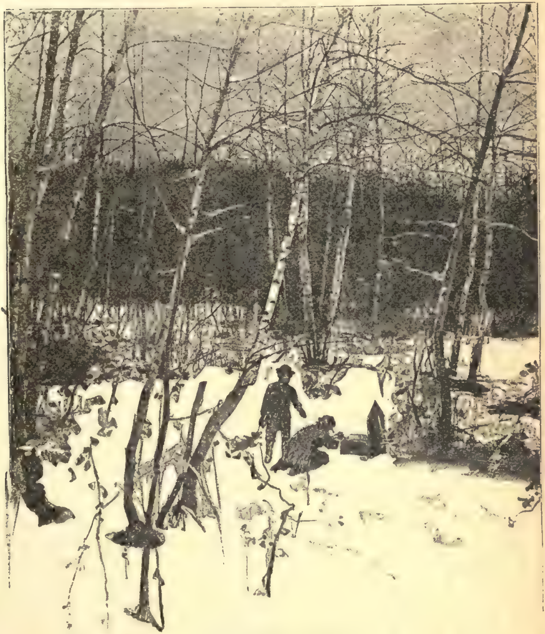
"Yes," replied Dr. Marvin, "he resembles your English redbreast closely both in appearance and habits, and our New England forefathers called him the 'blue robin.' To my taste the bluebird is the superior of the two, for what he lacks in stronger and more varied song he makes up in softer, sweeter notes. And then he is so beautiful! You have no blue birds of any kind in England, Amy. It seems to require our deeper-tinted skies to produce them. Ah, there comes his mate. You can tell her by the lighter blue of her plumage, and the tinge of brown on her head and back. She is a cold, coy beauty, even as a wife; but how gallant is her azure-coated beau! Flirt away, my little chap, and make the most of your courting and honeymoon. You will soon have family cares enough to discourage anybody but a bluebird;" and the doctor looked at his favorites with an exulting affection that caused a general laugh.

"I shall give our little friends something better than compliments," said Mr. Clifford, obeying his hospitable instincts, and he waded through the snow to the sunny side of an evergreen, and there cleared a space until the ground was bare. Then he scattered over this little plot an abundance of bread-crumbs and hay seed, and they all soon had the pleasure of seeing half a dozen little bobbing heads at breakfast. Johnnie and Alf, who on account of the deep snow did not go to school, were unwearied in watching the lovely little pensioners on their grandfather's bounty — not pensioners either, for, as the old man said, "They pay their way with notes that I am always glad to accept."

The work of path-making and shovelling snow from the doors and roofs of the out-buildings went on vigorously all the morning. Abram also attached the farm horses to the heavy snow-plough, to which he added his weight, and a broad, track-like furrow was made from the house to the road, and then for a mile or more each way upon the street, for the benefit of the neighbors. Before the day was very far advanced, the south wind, which had been a scarcely perceptible breath, freshened, and between the busy shovels and the swaying branches the air was full of glittering crystals. The bride-like world was throwing off her ornaments and preparing for the prose of every-day life ; and yet she did so in a cheerful, lightsome mood. The sunny eaves dropped a profusion of gems from the melting snow. There was a tinkle of water in the pipes leading to the cistern. From the cackle in the barn-yard it appeared that the hens had resolved on unwonted industry, and were receiving applause from the oft-crowing chanticleers. The horses, led out to drink, were in exuberant spirits, and appeared to find a child's delight in kicking up the snow. The cows came briskly from their stalls to the space cleared for them, and were soon ruminating in placid content. What though the snow covered the ground deeper than at any time during the winter, the subtile spirit of spring was recognized and welcomed not only by man, but also by the lower creation !

After putting Burt in a fair way of recovery, Dr. Marvin, armed with a shovel to burrow his way through the heavier drifts, drove homeward. Alf floundered off to his traps, and returned exultant with two rabbits. Amy was soon busy sketching them previous to their transformation into a pot-pie, Burt looking on with a deeper interest in the artist than in her art, although he had already learned that she had not a little skill with her pencil. Indeed, Burt promised to become quite reconciled to his part of invalid, in spite of protestations to the contrary ; and his inclination to think that Amy's companionship would be an antidote for every ill of life was increasing rapidly, in accordance with his hasty temperament, which arrived at conclusions long before others had begun to consider the steps leading to them.

Amy was still more a child than a woman; but a girl must be young indeed who does not recognize an admirer, especially so transparent a one as Burt would ever be. His ardent glances



THE RABBIT TRAP.

and compliments both amused and annoyed her. From his brothers she had obtained several hints of his previous and diversified gallantries, and was not at all assured that those in the future might not be equally varied. She did not doubt the sincerity of his homage, however; and since she had found it so easy to love him as a brother, it did not seem impossible that she should learn to regard him in another light, if all thought it best, and he "would only be sensible and understand that she did not wish to think about such things for years to come." Thus it may be seen that in one respect her heart was not much more advanced than that of little Johnnie. She expected to be married some time or other, and supposed it might as well be to Burt as to another, if their friends so desired it; but she was for putting off submission to woman's natural lot as long as possible. Possessing much tact, she was able in a great measure to repress the young fellow's demonstrativeness, and maintain their brotherly and sisterly relations; but it cost her effort, and sometimes she left his society flurried and wearied. With Webb she enjoyed perfect rest and a pleasing content. He was so quiet and strong that his very presence seemed to soothe her jarring nerves. He appeared to understand her, to have the power to make much that interested her more interesting, while upon her little feminine mysteries of needle and fancy work he looked with an admiring helplessness, as if she were more unapproachable in her sphere than he could ever be in his, with all his scientific facts and theories. Women like this tribute to their womanly ways from the sterner sex. Maggie's wifehood was made happy by it, for by a hundred little things she knew that the great, stalwart Leonard would be lost without her. Moreover, by his rescue of Burt, Webb had won a higher place in Amy's esteem. He had shown the prompt energy and courage which satisfy woman's ideal of manhood, and assure her of protection. Amy did not analyze her feelings or consciously assure herself of all this. She only felt that Webb was restful, and would give her a sense of safety, no matter what happened.

CHAPTER XV.

NATURE'S BUILDING MATERIALS.

SOME days after Burt's adventure, Dr. Marvin made his professional call in the evening. Mr. Alvord, Squire Bartley, and the minister also happened in, and all were soon chatting around Mr. Clifford's ruddy hearth. The pastor of this country parish was a sensible man, who, if he did not electrify his flock of a Sunday morning, honestly tried to guide it along safe paths, and led those whom he asked to follow. His power lay chiefly in the homes of his people, where his genial presence was ever welcomed. He did not regard those to whom he ministered as so many souls and subjects of theological dogma, but as flesh-and-blood men, women, and children, with complex interests and relations; and the heartiness of his laugh over a joke, often his own, and the havoc that he made in the dishes of nuts and apples, proved that he had plenty of good healthful blood himself. Although his hair was touched with frost, and he had never received any degree except his simple A.M., although the prospect of a metropolitan pulpit had grown remote indeed, he seemed the picture of content as he pared his apple and joined in the neighborly talk.

Squire Bartley had a growing sense of shortcoming in his farming operations. Notwithstanding his many acres, he felt himself growing "land-poor," as country people phrase it. He was not a reader, and looked with undisguised suspicion on book-farming. As for the agricultural journals, he said "they were full of new-fangled notions, and were kept up by people who liked to see their names in print." Nevertheless, he was compelled to admit that the Cliffords, who kept abreast of the age, obtained better crops, and made their business pay far better than he did, and he was inclined to turn his neighborly calls into thrifty use by questioning Leonard and Webb concerning their methods and management. Therefore he remarked to Leonard: "Do you find that you can keep your land in good condition by rotation of crops? Folks say this will do it, but I find some of our upland is getting mighty thin, and crops uncertain."

"What is your idea of rotation, squire?"

"Why, not growin' the same crop too often on the same ground."

"That is scarcely my idea. For the majority of soils the following rotation has been found most beneficial: corn and potatoes, which thoroughly subdue the sod the first year; root crops, as far as we grow them, and oats the second; then wheat or rye, seeded at the same time with clover or grass of some kind. We always try to plough our sod land in the fall, for in the intervening time before planting the sod partially decays, the land is sweetened and pulverized by the action of frost, and a good many injurious insects are killed also. But all rules need modification, and we try to study the nature of our various soils, and treat them accordingly."

"What! have a chemist prescribe for 'em like a doctor?" sneered the squire. "Mr. Walters, the rich city chap who bought Roger's worn-out farm, tried that to his heart's content, and mine too. He had a little of the dirt of each part of his farm analyzed, you know, and then he sent to New York for his phosphates, his potashes, his muriates, and his compound-super-universal panacea vegetates, and with all these bad-smelling mixtures — his barn was like a big agricultural drug-store — he was going to put into his skinned land just the elements lacking. In short, he gave his soil a big dose of powders, and we all know the result. If he had given his farm a pinch of snuff better crops ought to have been sneezed. No chemicals and land doctors for me, thank you. Beg pardon, Marvin! no reflections on your calling, but doctorin' land don't seem profitable for those who pay for the medicine."

They all laughed except Webb, who seemed nettled, but who quietly said, "Squire, will you please tell us what your house is made of?"

"Good lumber, sir."

"Well, when passing one day, I saw a fine stalk of corn in one of your fields. Will you also tell us what that was made of? It must have weighed, with the ears upon it, several pounds, and it was all of six feet high. How did it come into existence?"

"Why, it grew," said the squire, sententiously.

"That utterance was worthy of Solomon," remarked Dr. Marvin, laughing.

"It grew," continued Webb, "because it found the needed material at hand. I do not see how Nature can build a well-eared stalk of corn without proper material any more than you could have built your house without lumber. Suppose we have a soil in which the elements that make a crop of corn do not exist, or are present in a very deficient degree, what course is left for us but to supply what is lacking? Because Mr. Walters did not do this in the right way, is no reason why we should do nothing. If soil does not contain the ingredients of a crop, we must put them there, or our labor goes for nothing."

"Well, of course there's no gettin' around that; but yard manure is all I want. It's like a square meal to a man, and not a bit of powder on his tongue."

"No one wants anything better than barn-yard manure for most purposes, for it contains nearly all the elements needed by growing plants, and its mechanical action is most beneficial to the soil. But how many acres will you be able to cover with this fertilizer this spring?"

"That's just the rub," the squire answered. "We use all we have, and when I can pick it up cheap I buy some; but one can't cover a whole farm with it, and so in spite of you some fields get all run out."

"I don't think there's any need of their running out," said Leonard, emphatically. "I agree with Webb in one thing, if I can't follow him in all of his scientific theories — we have both decided never to let a field grow poor, any more than we would permit a horse or cow to so lose in flesh as to be nearly useless; therefore we not only buy fertilizers liberally, but use all the skill and care within our power to increase them. Barnyard manure can be doubled in bulk and almost doubled in value by composting with the right materials. We make the most of our peat swamps, fallen leaves, and rubbish in general. Enough goes to waste on many farms every year to keep several acres in good heart. But, as you say, we cannot begin to procure enough to go over all the land from which we are taking crops of some kind; therefore we maintain a rotation which is adapted to our various soils, and every now and then plough under a heavy green crop of clover, buckwheat, or rye. A green crop ploughed under is my great stand-by."

"I ploughed under a crop of buckwheat once," said the squire, discontentedly, "and I didn't see much good from it, except that the ground was light and mellow afterwards."

"That, at least, was a gain," Leonard continued; "but I can tell you why your ground was not much benefited, and perhaps injured. You scarcely ploughed under a green crop, for I remember that the grain in your buckwheat straw was partly ripe. It is the forming seed or grain that takes the substance out of land. You should have ploughed the buckwheat under just as it was coming into blossom. Up to that time the chief growth had been derived from the air, and there had been very little drain upon the soil."

"Well!" exclaimed the squire, incredulously, "I didn't know the air was so nourishing."

Webb had been showing increasing signs of disquietude during the last few moments, and now said, with some emphasis: "It seems to me, squire, that there is not much hope of our farming successfully unless we do know something of the materials that make our crops, and the conditions under which they grow. When you built your house you did not employ a man who had only a vague idea of how it was to be constructed, and what it was to be built of. Before your house was finished you had used lumber as your chief material, but you also employed brick, stone, lime, sand, nails, etc. If we examine a house, we find all these materials. If we wish to build another house, we know we must use them in their proper proportions. Now it is just as much a matter of fact, and is just as capable of proof, that a plant of any kind is built up on a regular plan, and from well-defined materials, as that a house is so built. The materials in various houses differ just as the elements in different kinds of plants vary. A man can decide what he will build of; Nature has decided forever what she will build of. She will construct a stalk of corn or wheat with its grain out of essentially the same materials to the end of time. Now suppose one or more of these necessary ingredients is limited in the soil, or has been taken from it by a succession of crops, what rational hope can we have for a good crop unless we place the absent material in the ground, and also put it there in a form suitable for the use of the plant?"

"What you say sounds plausible enough," answered the squire, scratching his head with the worried, perplexed air of a man convinced against his will. "How was it, then, that Walters made such a mess of it? He had his soil analyzed by a land doctor, and boasted that he was going to put into it just what was lacking. His soil may not be lacking now, but his crops are."

"It is possible that there are quacks among land doctors, as you call them, as well as among doctors of medicine," remarked Dr. Marvin.

"Or doctors of theology," added the minister.

"I looked into the Walters experiment somewhat carefully," Webb resumed, "and the causes of his failure were apparent to any one who has given a little study to the nature of soils and plant food. Some of his land needs draining. The ground is sour and cold from stagnant water beneath the surface, and the plant food which Nature originally placed in it is inert and in no condition to be used. Nearly all of his uplands have been depleted of organic or vegetable matter. He did not put into the soil all that the plants needed, and the fact that his crops were poor proves it. The materials he used may have been adulterated, or not in a form which the plants could assimilate at the time. Give Nature a soil in the right mechanical condition — that is, light, mellow, moist, but not wet, and containing the essential elements of a crop — and she will produce it unless the season is so adverse that it cannot grow. I do not see how one can hope to be successful unless he studies Nature's methods and learns her needs, adapting his labor to the former, and supplying the latter. For instance, nitrogen in the form of ammonia is so essential to our crops that without it they could never come to maturity were all the other elements of plant food present in excess. Suppose that for several successive years we grow wheat upon a field with an average crop of twenty-five bushels to the acre. This amount of grain with its straw will take from the soil about fifty-one pounds of ammonia annually, and when the nitrogen (which is the main element of ammonia) gives out, the wheat will fail, although other plant food may be present in abundance. This is one reason why dairy farms from which all the milk is sold often grow poor. Milk is exceedingly rich in nitrogen, and through the milk the farm is depleted of this essential element faster than it is replaced by fertilizers. A man may thus be virtually selling his farm, or that which gives it value, without knowing it."

"But what's a man to do?" asked the squire, with a look of helpless perplexity. "How is one to know when his land needs nitrogen or ammonia and all the other kinds of plant food, as you call it, and how must he go to work to get and apply it?"

"You are asking large questions, squire," Webb replied, with a quiet smile. "In the course of a year you decide a number of legal questions, and I suppose read books, consult authorities, and use considerable judgment. It certainly never would do for people to settle these questions at hap-hazard or according to their own individual notions. Their decisions might be reversed. Whatever the courts may do, Nature is certain to reverse our decisions and bring to naught our action unless we comply with her laws and requirements."

The squire's experience coincided so truly with Webb's words that he urged no further objections against accurate agricultural knowledge, even though the information must be obtained in part at least from books and journals.

CHAPTER XVI.

GOSSIP ABOUT BIRD-NEIGHBORS.

"DOCTOR," said Mrs. Leonard, "Amy and I have been indulging in some surmises over a remark you made the other day about the bluebirds. You said the female was a cold, coy beauty, and that her mate would soon be overburdened with family cares. Indeed, I think you rather reflected on our sex as represented by Mrs. Bluebird."

"I fear I cannot retract. The female bluebird is singularly devoid of sentiment, and takes life in the most serious and matter-of-fact way. Her nest and her young are all in all to her. John Burroughs, who is a very close observer, says she shows no affection for the male and no pleasure in his society, and if he is killed she goes in quest of another mate in the most business-like manner, as one would go to a shop on an errand."

"The heartless little jade!" cried Maggie, with a glance at Leonard which plainly said that such was not her style at all.

"Nevertheless," continued the doctor, "she awakens a love in her husband which is blind to every defect. He is gallantry itself, and at the same time the happiest and most hilarious of lovers. Since she insists on building her nest herself, and having everything to her own mind, he does not shrug his blue shoulders and stand indifferently or sullenly aloof. He goes with her everywhere, flying a little in advance as if for protection, inspects her work with flattering minuteness, applauds and compliments continually. Indeed, he is the ideal French beau very much in love."

"In other words, the counterpart of Leonard," said Burt, at which they all laughed.

"But you spoke of his family cares," Webb remarked: "he contributes something more than compliments, does he not?"

"Indeed he does. He settles down into the most devoted of husbands and fathers. The female usually hatches three broods, and as the season advances he has his hands, or his beak rather, very full of business. I think Burroughs is mistaken in saying that he is in most cases the ornamental member of the firm. He feeds his wife as she sits on the nest, and often the first brood is not out of the way before he has another to provide for. Therefore he is seen bringing food to his wife and two sets of children, and occasionally taking her place on the nest. Nor does he ever get over his delusion that his mate is delighted with his song and little gallantries, for he keeps them up also to the last. So he has to be up early and late, and altogether must be a very tired little bird when he gets a chance to put his head under his wing."

"Poor little fellow! and to think that she doesn't care for him!" sighed Amy, pityingly; and they all laughed so heartily that she bent her head over her work to hide the rich color that stole into her face — all laughed except Mr. Alvord, who, as usual, was an attentive and quiet listener, sitting a little in the background, so that his face was in partial shadow. Keen-eyed Maggie, whose sympathies were deeply enlisted in behalf of her sad and taciturn neighbor, observed that he regarded Amy with a close, wistful scrutiny, as if he were reading her thoughts. Then an expression of anguish, of something like despair, flitted across his face. "He has lavished the best treasures of his heart and life on some one who did not care," was her mental comment.

"You won't be like our little friend in blue, eh, Amy?" said old Mr. Clifford; but with girlish shyness she would not reply to any such question.

"Don't take it so to heart, Miss Amy. Mr. B. is never disenchanted," the doctor remarked.

"I don't like Mrs. B. at all," said Maggie, decidedly; "and it seems to me that I know women of whom she is a type — women whose whole souls are engrossed with their material life. Human husbands are not so blind as bluebirds, and they want something more than housekeepers and nurses in their wives."

"Excellent!" cried Rev. Mr. Barkdale; "you improve the occasion better than I could. But, doctor, how about our callous widow bluebird finding another mate after the mating season is over?"

"There are always some bachelors around, unsuccessful wooers whose early blandishments were vain."

"And are there no respectable spinsters with whom they might take up as a last resort?" Leonard queried.

"No, none at all. Think of that, ye maidens of New England, where the males are nearly all migrants and do not return! The only chance for a bird-bachelor is to console some widow whom accident has bereaved of her mate. Widowers also are ready for an immediate second marriage. Birds and beasts of prey and boys — hey, Alf — bring about a good many step-parents."

"Alf don't kill any little birds, do you, Alf?" asked his mother.

"Well, not lately. You said they felt so bad over it. But if they get over it so easy as the doctor says — "

"Now, doctor, you see the result of your scientific teaching."

"Why, Mrs. Leonard, are you in sympathy with the priestcraft that would keep people virtuous through ignorance?" said the minister, laughing. "Alf must learn to do right, knowing all the facts. I don't believe he will shy a stone at a bird this coming year unless it is in mischief."

"Well," said Squire Bartley, who had relapsed into a half-doze as the conversation lost its practical bent, "between the birds and boys I don't see as we shall be able to raise any fruit before long. If our boys hadn't killed about all the robins round our house last summer, I don't think we'd 'a had a cherry or strawberry."

"I'm afraid, squire," put in Webb, quietly, "that if all followed your boys' example, insects would soon have the better of us. They are far worse than the birds. I've seen it stated on good authority that a fledgling robin eats forty per cent. more than its own weight every twenty-four hours, and I suppose it would be almost impossible to compute the number of noxious worms and moths destroyed by a family of robins in one season. They earn their share of fruit."

"Webb is right, squire," added the doctor, emphatically. "Were it not for the birds, the country would soon be as bare as the locusts left Egypt. Even the crow, against which you are so vindictive, is one of your best friends."

"Oh, now, come, I can't swallow that. Crows pull up my corn, rob hens' nests, carry off young chickens. They even rob the nests of the other birds you're so fond of. Why, some state legislatures give a bounty for their destruction."

"If there had only been a bounty for killing off the legislators, the states would have fared better," replied the doctor, with some heat. "It can be proved beyond a doubt that the crow is unsurpassed by any other bird in usefulness. He is one of the best friends you have."

"Deliver me from my friends, then," said the squire, rising; and he departed, with his prejudices against modern ideas and methods somewhat confirmed.

Like multitudes of his class, he observed in nature only that which was forced upon his attention through the medium of immediate profit and loss. The crows pulled up his corn, and carried off an occasional chicken; the robins ate a little fruit; therefore death to crows and robins. They all felt a certain sense of relief at his departure, for while their sympathies touched his on the lower plane of mere utility and money value, it would be bondage to them to be kept from other and higher considerations. Moreover, in his own material sphere his narrow prejudices were ever a jarring element that often exasperated Webb, who had been known to mutter, "Such clods of earth bring discredit on our calling."

Burt, with a mischievous purpose illuminating his face, remarked: "I'll try to put the squire into a dilemma. If I can catch one of his boys shooting robins out of season, I will lodge a complaint with him, and insist on the fine;" and his design was laughingly applauded.

"I admit," said Mr. Clifford, "that Webb has won me over to a toleration of crows, but until late years I regarded them as unmitigated pests."

"Undeserved enmity comes about in this way," Webb replied. "We see a crow in mischief occasionally, and the fact is laid up against him. If we sought to know what he was about when not in mischief, our views would soon change. It would be far better to have a little corn pulled up than to be unable to raise corn at all. Crows can be kept from the field during the brief periods when they do harm, but myriads of grasshoppers cannot be managed. Moreover, the crow destroys very many field-mice and other rodents, but chief of all he is the worst enemy of the May-beetle and its larvæ. In regions of the country where the crow has been almost exterminated by poison and other means, this insect has left the meadows brown and sear, while grasshoppers have partially destroyed the most valuable crops. Why can't farmers get out of their plodding, ox-like ways, and learn to co-work with Nature like men?"

"Hurrah for Webb!" cried Burt. "Who would have thought that the squire and a crow could evoke such a peroration? That flower of eloquence surely grew from a rank, dark soil."

"Squire Bartley amuses me very much," said Mrs. Clifford, from the sofa, with a low laugh. "He seems the only one who has the power to ruffle Webb."

"Little wonder," thought Amy, "for it would be hard to find two natures more antagonistic."

"It seems to me that this has been a very silent winter," the minister remarked. "In my walks and drives of late I have scarcely heard the chirp of a bird. Are there many that stay with us through this season, doctor?"

"More than you would suppose. But you would not be apt to meet many of them unless you sought for them. At this time they are gathered in sheltered localities abounding in their favorite food. Shall I tell you about some that I have observed throughout several successive winters?"

Having received eager encouragement, he resumed: "My favorites, the bluebirds, we have considered quite at length. They are very useful, for their food in summer consists chiefly of the smaller beetles and the larvæ of little butterflies and moths. Many robins stay all winter. It is a question of food, not of climate, with them. In certain valleys of the White Mountains there is an abundance of berries, and flocks of robins feed on them all winter, although the cold reaches the freezing-point of mercury. As we have said, they are among the most useful of the insect destroyers. The golden-crested kinglet is a little mite of a bird, not four inches long, with a central patch of orange-red on his crown. He breeds in the far North, and wintering here is for him like going to the South. In summer he is a fly-catcher, but here he searches the bark of forest trees with microscopic scrutiny for the larvæ of insects. We all know the lively black-capped chickadees that fly around in flocks throughout the winter. Sometimes their search for food leads them into the heart of towns and cities, where they are as bold and as much at home as the English sparrow. They also gather around the camps of log-cutters in the forest, become very tame, and plaintively cry for their share in the meals. They remain all the year, nesting in decayed logs, posts, stumps, and even in sides of houses, although they prefer the edge of a wood. If they can find a hole to suit them, very well; if they can't, they will make one. Their devotion to their young is remarkable. A nest in a decayed stump was uncovered, and the mother bird twice taken off by hand, and each time she returned and covered her brood. She uttered no cries or complaints, but devotedly interposed her little form between what must have seemed terrific monsters and her young, and looked at the human ogres with the resolute eyes of self-sacrifice. If she could have known it, the monsters only wished to satisfy their curiosity, and were admiring her beyond measure. Chickadees are exceedingly useful birds, and make great havoc among the insects.

"Our next bird is merely a winter sojourner, for he goes north in spring like the kinglet. The scientists, with a fine sense of the fitness of things, have given him a name in harmony, *Troglodytes parvulus*, var. *Hyemalis*."

"What monster bird is this?" cried Amy.

"He is about as big as your thumb, and ordinary mortals are content to call him the winter wren. He is a saucy little atom of a bird, with his tail pointing rakishly towards his head. I regret exceedingly to add that he is but a winter resident with us, and we rarely hear his song. Mr. Burroughs says that he is a 'marvellous songster,' his notes having a 'sweet rhythmical cadence that holds you entranced.' By the way, if you wish to fall in love with birds, you should read the books of John Burroughs. A little mite of a creature, like the hermit-thrush, he fills the wild, remote woods of the North with melody, and has not been known to breed farther south than Lake Mohunk. The brown creeper and the yellow-rumped warbler I will merely mention. Both migrate to the North in the spring, and the latter is only an occasional winter resident. The former is a queer little creature that alights at the base of a tree and creeps spirally round and round to its very top, when it sweeps down to the base of another tree to repeat the process. He is ever intent on business. Purple finches are usually abundant in winter, though not very numerous in summer. I value them because they are handsome birds, and both male and female sing in autumn and winter, when bird music is at a premium. I won't speak of the Carolina wax-wing, *alias* cedar or cherry bird, now. Next June, when strawberries and cherries are ripe, we can form his intimate acquaintance."

"We have already made it, to the cost of both our patience and purse," said Webb. "He is one of the birds for whom I have no mercy."

"That is because you are not sufficiently acquainted with him. I admit that he is an arrant thief of fruit, and that, as his advocate, I have a difficult case. I shall not plead for him until summer, when he is in such imminent danger of capital punishment. He's a little beauty, though, with his jaunty crest and gold-tipped tail. I shall not say one word in favor of the next bird that I mention, the great Northern shrike, or butcher-bird. He is not an honest bird of prey that all the smaller feathered tribes know at a glance, like the hawk; he is a disguised assassin, and possessed by the very demon of cruelty. He is a handsome fellow, little over ten inches long, with a short, powerful beak, the upper mandible sharply curved. His body is of a bluish-gray color, with 'markings of white' on his dusky wings and tail. Three shrikes once made such havoc among the sparrows of Boston Common that it became necessary to take much pains to destroy them. He is not only a murderer, but an exceedingly treacherous one, for both Mr. Audubon and Mr. Nuttall speak of his efforts to decoy little birds within his reach by imitating their notes, and he does this so closely that he is called a mocking-bird in some parts of New England. When he utters his usual note and reveals himself, his voice very properly resembles the 'discordant creaking of a sign-board hinge.' A flock of snow-birds or finches may be sporting and feeding in some low shrubbery, for instance. They may hear a bird approaching, imitating their own notes. A moment later the shrike will be seen among them, causing no alarm, for his appearance is in his favor. Suddenly he will pounce upon an unsuspecting neighbor, and with one blow of his beak take off the top of its head, dining on its brains. If there is a chance to kill several more, he will, like a butcher, hang his prey on a thorn, or in the crotch of a tree, and return for his favorite morsel when his hunt is over. After devouring the head of a bird he will leave the body, unless game is scarce. It is well they are not plentiful, or else our canary pets would be in danger, for a shrike will dart through an open window and attack birds in cages, even when members of the family are present. In one instance Mr. Brewer, the ornithologist, was sitting by a closed window with a canary in a cage above his head, and a shrike, ignorant of the intervening glass, dashed against the window, and fell stunned upon the snow. He was taken in, and found to be tame, but sullen. He refused raw meat, but tore and devoured little birds very readily. As I said before, it is fortunate he is rare, though why he is so I scarcely know. He may have enemies in the North, where he breeds; for I am glad to say that he is only a winter resident.

"It gives one a genuine sense of relief to turn from this Apache, this treacherous scalper of birds, to those genuinely useful little songsters, the tree and the song sparrow. The former is essentially a Northern bird, and breeds in the high arctic regions. He has a fine song, which we hear in early April as his parting souvenir. The song sparrow will be a great favorite with you, Miss Amy, for he is one of our finest singers, whose song resembles the opening notes of a canary, but has more sweetness and expression. Those that remain with us depart for the North at the first tokens of spring, and are replaced by myriads of other migrants that usually arrive early in March. You will hear them some mild morning soon. They are very useful in destroying the worst kinds of insects. A fit associate for the song sparrow is the American goldfinch, or yellowbird, which is as destructive of the seeds of weeds as the former is of the smaller insect pests. In summer it is of a bright gamboge yellow, with black crown, wings, and tail. At this time he is a little olive-brown bird, and mingles with his fellows in small flocks. They are sometimes killed and sold as reed-birds. They are brilliant singers.

"The snow-bird and snow-bunting are not identical by any means; indeed, each is of a different genus. The bunting's true home is in the far North, and it is not apt to be abundant here except in severe weather. Specimens have been found, however, early in November, but more often they appear with a late December snow-storm, their wild notes suggesting the arctic wastes from which they have recently drifted southward. The sleigh tracks on the frozen Hudson are among their favorite haunts, and they are not often abundant in the woods on this side of the river. Flocks can usually be found spending the winter along the railroad on the eastern shore. Here they become very fat, and so begrimed with the dirt and grease on the track that you would never associate them with the snowy North. They ever make, however, a singular and pretty spectacle when flying up between one and the late afternoon sun, for the predominant white in their wings and tail seems almost transparent. They breed at the extreme North, even along the Arctic Sea, in Greenland and Iceland, and are fond of marine localities at all times. It's hard to realize that the little fellows with whom we are now so familiar start within a month for regions above the arctic circle. I once, when a boy, fired into a flock feeding in a sleigh track on the ice of the river. Some of those that escaped soon returned to their dead and wounded companions, and in their solicitude would let me come very near, nor, unless driven away, would they leave the injured ones until life was extinct. On another occasion I brought some wounded ones home, and they ate as if starved, and soon became very tame, alighting upon the table at meal-times with a freedom from ceremony which made it necessary to shut them up. They spent most of their time among the house plants by the window, but towards spring the migratory instinct asserted itself, and they became very restless, pecking at the panes in their eagerness to get away. Soon afterwards our little guests may have been sporting on an arctic beach. An effort was once made in Massachusetts to keep a wounded snow-bunting through the summer, but at last it died from the heat. They are usually on the wing northward early in March.

"The ordinary snow-bird is a very unpretentious and familiar little friend. You can find him almost any day from the 1st of October to the 1st of May, and may know him by his grayish or ashy black head, back, and wings, white body underneath from the middle of his breast backward, and white external tail-feathers. He is said to be abundant all over America east of the Black Hills, and breeds as far south as the mountains of Virginia. There are plenty of them in summer along the Shawangunk range, just west of us, in the Catskills, and so northward above the arctic circle. In the spring, before it leaves us, you will often hear its pretty little song. They are very much afraid of hawks, which make havoc among them at all times, but are fearless of their human — and especially of their humane — neighbors. Severe weather will often bring them to our very doors, and drive them into the outskirts of large cities. They are not only harmless, but very useful, for they devour innumerable seeds, and small insects with their larvæ.

"Dear me! I could talk about birds all night."

"And we could listen to you," chorussed several voices.

"I never before realized that we had such interesting winter neighbors and visitors," said Mrs. Clifford, and the lustre of her eyes and the faint bloom on her cheeks proved how deeply these little children of nature had enlisted her sympathies.

"They are interesting, even when in one short evening I can give but in bald, brief outline a few of their characteristics. Your words suggest the true way of becoming acquainted with them. Regard them as neighbors and guests, in the main very useful friends, and then you will naturally wish to know more about them. In most instances they are quite susceptible to kindness, and are ready to be intimate with us. That handsome bird, the blue jay, so wild at the East, is as tame and domestic as the robin in many parts of the West, because treated well. He is also a winter resident, and one of the most intelligent birds in existence. Indeed, he is a genuine humorist, and many amusing stories are told of his pranks. His powers of mimicry are but slightly surpassed by those of the mocking-bird, and it is his delight to send the smaller feathered tribes to covert by imitating the cries of the sparrow, hawk, and other birds of prey. When so tame as to haunt the neighborhood of dwellings, he is unwearied in playing his tricks on domestic fowls, and they — silly creatures ! — never learn to detect the practical joke, for, no matter how often it is repeated, they hasten panic-stricken to shelter. Wilson speaks of him as the trumpeter of the feathered chorus, but his range of notes is very great, passing from harsh, grating sounds, like the screeching of an unlubricated axle, to a warbling as soft and modulated as that of a bluebird, and again, prompted by his mercurial nature, screaming like a derisive fish-wife. Fledglings will develop contentedly in a cage, and become tame and amusing pets. They will learn to imitate the human voice and almost every other familiar sound. A gentleman in South Carolina had one that was as loquacious as a parrot, and could utter distinctly several words. In this region they are hunted, and too shy for familiar acquaintance. When a boy, I have been tantalized almost beyond endurance by them, and they seemed to know and delight in the fact. I was wild to get a shot at them, but they would keep just out of range, mocking me with discordant cries, and alarming all the other game in the vicinity. They often had more sport than I. It is a pity that the small boy with his gun cannot be taught to let them alone. If they were as domestic and plentiful as robins, they would render us immense service. A colony of jays would soon destroy all the tent-caterpillars on your place, and many other pests. In Indiana they will build in the shrubbery around dwellings, but we usually hear their cries from mountain-sides and distant groves.

Pleasant memories of rambles and nutting excursions they always awaken. The blue jay belongs to the crow family, and has all the brains of his black-coated and more sedate cousins. At the North, he will, like a squirrel, lay up for winter a hoard of acorns and beech mast. An experienced bird-fancier asserts that he found the jay 'more ingenious, cunning, and teachable than any other species of birds that he had ever attempted to instruct.'

"One of our most beautiful and interesting winter visitants is the pine grosbeak. Although very abundant in some seasons, even extending its migrations to the latitude of Philadelphia, it is irregular, and only the coldest weather prompts its excursions southward. The general color of the males is a light carmine, or rose, and if only plentiful they would make a beautiful feature in our snowy landscape. As a general thing, the red tints are brighter in the American than in the European birds. The females, however, are much more modest in their plumage, being ash-colored above, with a trace of carmine behind their heads and upon their upper tail coverts, and sometimes tinged with greenish-yellow beneath. The females are by far our more abundant visitants, for in the winter of '75 I saw numerous flocks, and not over two per cent. were males in red plumage. Still, strange to say, I saw a large flock of adult males the preceding November, feeding on the seeds of a Norway spruce before our house. Oh, what a brilliant assemblage they made among the dark branches! In their usual haunts they live a very retired life. The deepest recesses of the pine forests at the far North are their favorite haunts, and here the majority generally remain throughout the year. In these remote wilds is bred the fearlessness of man which is the result of ignorance, for they are among the tamest of all wild birds, finding, in this respect, their counterpart in the American red cross-bill, another occasional cold-weather visitant. For several winters the grosbeaks were exceedingly abundant in the vicinity of Boston, and were so tame that they could be captured in butterfly nets, and knocked down with poles. The markets became full of them, and many were caged. While tame they were very unhappy in confinement, and as spring advanced their mournful cries over their captivity became incessant. They can be kept as pets, however, and will often sing in the night. Mr. Audubon observed that when he fired at one of their number, the others, instead of flying away, would approach within a few feet, and gaze at him with undisguised curiosity, unmingled with fear. I have seen some large flocks this winter, and a few fed daily on a bare plot of ground at the end of our piazza. I was standing above this plot one day, when a magnificent red male flew just beneath my feet and drank at a little pool. I never saw anything more lovely in my life than the varying sheen of his brilliant tropical-like plumage. He was like a many-hued animated flower, and was so fearless that I could have touched him with a cane. One very severe, stormy winter the grosbeaks fairly crowded the streets of Pictou. A gentleman took one of these half-starved birds into his room, where it lived at large, and soon became the tamest and most affectionate of pets. But in the spring, when its mates were migrating north, Nature asserted herself, and it lost its familiarity, and filled the house with its piteous wailings, refused food, and sought constantly to escape. When the grosbeaks are with us you would not be apt to notice them unless you stumbled directly upon them, for they are the most silent of birds, which is remarkable, since the great majority of them are females."

"That is just the reason why they are so still," remarked Mrs. Leonard. "Ladies never speak unless they have something to say."

"Far be it from me to contradict you. The lady grosbeaks certainly have very little to say to one another, though when mating in their secluded haunts they probably express their preferences decidedly. If they have an ear for music, they must enjoy their wooing immensely, for there is scarcely a lovelier song than that of the male grosbeak. I never heard it but once, and may never again; but the thrill of delight that I experienced that intensely cold March day can never be forgotten. I was following the course of a stream that flowed at the bottom of a deep ravine, when, most unexpectedly, I heard a new song, which proceeded from far up the glen. The notes were loud, rich, and sweet, and I hastened on to identify the new vocalist. I soon discovered a superb red pine grosbeak perched on the top of a tall hemlock. His rose-colored plumage and mellow notes on that bleak day caused me to regret exceedingly that he was only an uncertain and transient visitor to our region.

"We have a large family of resident hawks in this vicinity; indeed, there are nine varieties of this species of bird with us at this time, although some of them are rarely seen. The marsh-hawk has a bluish or brown plumage, and in either case is distinguished by a patch of white on its upper tail coverts. You would not be apt to meet with it except in its favorite haunts. I found a nest in the centre of Consook Marsh, below West Point. It was a rude affair. The nests of this hawk are usually made of hay, lined with pine needles, and sometimes at the North with feathers. This bird is found nearly everywhere in North America, and breeds as high as Hudson Bay. In the marshes on the Delaware it is often called the mouse-hawk, for it sweeps swiftly along the low ground in search of a species of mouse common in that locality. It is said to be very useful in the Southern rice-fields, since, as it sails low, it interrupts the flocks of bobolinks, or rice-birds, in their depredations. Planters say that one marsh-hawk accomplishes more than several negroes in alarming these greedy little gourmands. In this region they do us no practical harm.

"Our most abundant hawk is the broad-winged, which will measure about thirty-six inches with wings extended. The plumage of this bird is so dusky as to impart a prevalent brownish color, and the species is distributed generally over eastern North America. Unlike the marsh-hawk, it builds in trees, and Mr. Audubon describes a nest as similar to that of the crow —

a resemblance easily accounted for by the frequency with which this hawk will repair crows' nests of former years for its own use. I once shot one upon such a nest, from which I had taken crows' eggs the preceding summer. I had only wounded the bird, and he clawed me severely before I was able to capture him. I once took a fledgling from a nest, and he became very fond of me, and quite gentle, but he would not let any one else handle him. On another occasion, when I was examining a nest, the male bird flew to a branch just over it, uttering loud, squealing cries, thence darted swiftly past me, and so close that I could feel the rush of air made by his wings; then he perched near again, and threatened me in every way he could, extending his wings, inclining his head and body towards me, making meanwhile a queer whistling sound. Only when I reached the nest would the female leave it, and then she withdrew but a short distance, returning as soon as I began to descend. The devotion of these wild creatures to their young is often marvellous. Mr. Audubon describes this hawk as 'spiritless, inactive, and so deficient in courage that he is often chased by the little sparrow-hawk and kingbird.' Another naturalist dissents emphatically from this view, and regards the broad-winged as the most courageous and spirited of his family, citing an instance of a man in his employ who, while ascending to a nest, was assailed with great fury. His hat was torn from his head, and he would have been injured had not the bird been shot. He also gives another example of courage in an attack by this hawk upon a boy seeking to rob its nest. It fastened its talons in his arm, and could not be beaten off until it was killed. Perhaps both naturalists are right. It is brave and fierce when its home is disturbed, and lacks the courage to attack other birds of its own kind. At any rate, it has no hesitancy in making hawk-love to chickens and ducklings, but as a rule subsists on insects and small quadrupeds. It is not a very common winter resident, but early in March it begins to come northward in flocks.

"Next to the broad-winged, the sharp-shinned is our most abundant hawk, and is found throughout the entire continent from Hudson Bay to Mexico. It usually builds its nest in trees, and occasionally on ledges of rocks, and as a general thing takes some pains in its construction. Its domicile approaches the eagle's nest in form, is broad and shallow, and made of sticks and twigs lined thinly with dried leaves, mosses, etc. A full-grown female — which, as I told you once before, is always larger than the male among birds of prey — measures about twenty-six inches with wings extended. It is lead-colored above, and lighter beneath. You can easily recognize this hawk by its short wings, long tail, and swift, irregular flight. One moment it is high in the air, the next it disappears in the grass, having seized the object of its pursuit. It is capable of surprisingly sudden dashes, and its pursuit is so rapid that escape is well-nigh hopeless. It is not daunted by obstacles. Mr. Audubon saw one dart into a thicket of briers, strike and instantly kill a thrush, and emerge with it on the opposite side. It often makes havoc among young chickens. One came every day to a poultry-yard until it had carried off over twenty. It does not hesitate to pounce down upon a chicken even in the farmer's presence; and one, in a headlong pursuit, broke through the glass of a greenhouse, then dashed through another glass partition, and was only brought up by a third. Pigeons are also quite in its line. Indeed, it is a bold red-taloned freebooter, and only condescends to insects and the smaller reptiles when there are no little birds at hand. During the spring migration this hawk is sometimes seen in large flocks.

"The American goshawk is the next bird of this family that I will mention, and I am very glad to say that he is only a winter resident. He is the dreaded blue hen-hawk of New England, and is about twenty-three inches long, and forty-four from tip to tip of wings. One good authority says that for strength, intrepidity, and fury he cannot be surpassed. He will swoop down into a poultry-yard and carry off a chicken almost before you can take a breath. He is swift, cunning, and adroit rather than heedless and headlong, like the sharp-shinned hawk, and although the bereaved farmer may be on the alert with his gun, this marauder will watch his chance, dash into the yard, then out again with his prey, so suddenly that only the despairing cries of the fowl reveal the murderous onslaught. In western Maine this hawk is very common. A housewife will hear a rush of wings and cries of terror, and can only reach the door in time to see one of these robbers sailing off with the finest of her pullets. Hares and wild-ducks are favorite game also. The goshawk will take a mallard with perfect ease, neatly and deliberately strip off the feathers, and then, like an epicure, eat the breast only. Audubon once saw a large flock of blackbirds crossing the Ohio. Like an arrow a goshawk darted upon them, while they, in their fright, huddled together. The hawk seized one after another, giving each a death-squeeze, then dropping it into the water. In this way he killed five before the flock escaped into the woods. He then leisurely went back, picked them up one by one, and carried them to the spot selected for his lunch. With us, I am happy to say, he is shy and distant, preferring the river marshes to the vicinity of our farm-yards. He usually takes his prey while swooping swiftly along on the wing."

"Have we any hawks similar to those employed in the old-time falconry of Europe?" Webb asked.

"Yes; our duck or great-footed hawk is almost identical with the well-known peregrine falcon of Europe. It is a permanent resident, and breeds on the inaccessible cliffs of the Highlands, although preferring similar localities along a rocky sea-coast. There is no reason to doubt that our duck-hawk might be trained for the chase as readily as its foreign congener. It has the same wonderful powers of flight, equal docility in confinement, and can be taught to love and obey its master. I have often wondered why falconry has not been revived, like other ancient sports. The Germans are said to have employed trained hawks to capture carrier-pigeons that were sent out with missives by the French during the siege of Paris. In a few instances the duck-hawk has been known to nest in trees. It is a solitary bird, and the sexes do not associate except at the breeding season. While it prefers water-fowl, it does not confine itself to them. I shot one on a Long Island beach and found in its crop whole legs of the robin, Alice's thrush, catbird, and warblers. It measures about forty-five inches in the stretch of its wings, and its prevailing color is of a dark blue.

"The pigeon-hawk is not very rare at this season. Professor Baird describes this bird as remarkable for its rapid flight, its courage, and its enterprise in attacking birds even larger than itself. This accords with my experience, for my only specimen was shot in the act of destroying a hen. He is about the size of our common flicker, or high-holder, which bird, with robins, pigeons, and others of similar size, is his favorite game. The sparrow-hawk is rare at this time, and is only abundant occasionally during its migrations. The red-shouldered hawk is a handsome bird, with some very good traits, and is a common permanent resident. Unless hunted, these birds are not shy, and they remain mated throughout the year. Many a human pair might learn much from their affectionate and considerate treatment of each other. They do not trouble poultry-yards, and are fond of frogs, cray-fish, and even insects. Occasionally they will attack birds as large as a meadow-lark. They have a high and very irregular flight, but occasionally they so stuff themselves with frogs that they can scarcely move. Wilson found one with the remains of ten frogs in his crop.

"Last among the winter residents I can merely mention the red-tailed hawk, so named from the deep rufus color of its tail feathers. It is a heavy, robust bird, and while it usually feeds on mice, moles, and shrews that abound in meadows, its depredations on farm-yards are not infrequent. It is widely distributed throughout the continent, and abundant here. It is a powerful bird, and can compass long distances with a strong, steady flight, often moving with no apparent motion of the wings. It rarely seizes its prey while flying, like the goshawk, but with its keen vision will inspect the immediate vicinity from the branch of a tree, and thence dart upon it. It is not particular as to its food. Insects, birds, and reptiles are alike welcome game, and in summer it may be seen carrying a writhing snake through the air. While flying it utters a very harsh, peculiar, and disagreeable scream, and by some is called the squealing hawk. The social habits of this bird are in appropriate concord with its voice. After rearing their young the sexes separate, and are jealous of and hostile to each other. It may easily happen that if the wife of the spring captures any prey, her former mate will struggle fiercely for its possession, and the screaming clamor of the fight will rival a conjugal quarrel in the Bowery. In this respect they form an unpleasing contrast with the red-shouldered hawks, among whom marriage is permanent, and maintained with lover-like attentions. Thus it would appear that there are contrasts of character even in the hawk world; and when you remember that we have fifteen other varieties of this bird, besides the nine I have mentioned, you may think that nature, like society, is rather prodigal in hawks. As civilization advances, however, innocence stands a better chance. At least this is true of the harmless song-birds.

"I have now given you free-hand sketches of the great majority of our winter residents, and these outlines are necessarily very defective from their brevity as well as for other reasons. I have already talked an unconscionably long time; but what else could you expect from a man with a hobby? As it is, I am not near through, for the queer little white-bellied nut-hatch, and his associates in habits, the downy, the hairy, the golden-winged, and the yellow-bellied woodpeckers, and four species of owls, are also with us at this season. With the bluebirds the great tide of migration has already turned northward, and all through March, April, and May I expect to greet the successive arrivals of old friends every time I go out to visit my patients. I can assure you that I have no stupid, lonely drives, unless the nights are dark and stormy. Little Johnnie, I see, has gone to sleep. I must try to meet some fairies and banshees in the moonlight for her benefit. But, Alf, I'm delighted to see you so wide-awake. Shooting birds as game merely is very well, but capturing them in a way to know all about them is a sport that is always in season, and would grow more and more absorbing if you lived a thousand years."

A bent for life was probably given to the boy's mind that night.

CHAPTER XVII.

FISHING THROUGH THE ICE.

EVERY day through the latter part of February the sun grew higher, and its rays more potent. The snow gave rapidly in warm southern nooks and slopes, and the icicles lengthened from the eaves and overhanging rocks, forming in many instances beautiful crystal fringes. On northern slopes and shaded places the snow scarcely wasted at all, and Amy often wondered how the vast white body that covered the earth could ever disappear in time for spring. But there soon came a raw, chilly, cloudy day, with a high south wind, and the snow sank away, increasing the apparent height of the fences, and revealing objects hitherto hidden, as if some magic were at work.

" I have always observed," said Mr. Clifford, " that a day like this, raw and cold as it seems, does more to carry off the snow than a week of spring sunshine, although it may be warm for the season. What is more, the snow is wasted evenly, and not merely on sunny slopes. The wind seems to soak up the melting snow like a great sponge, for the streams are not perceptibly raised."

" The air does take it up in the form of vapor," said Webb, " and that is why we have such a chilly snow atmosphere. Rapidly melting snow tends to lower the temperature proportionately, just as ice around a form of cream, when made to melt quickly by the addition of salt, absorbs all heat in its vicinity so fast that the cream is congealed. But this accumulation of vapor in the air must come down again, perhaps in the form of snow, and so there will be no apparent gain."

"If no apparent gain, could there be a real gain by another fall of snow?" Amy asked, for to inexperienced eyes there certainly seemed more than could be disposed of in time for April flowers.

"Yes," he replied, "a fall of snow might make this whole section warmer for a time, and so hasten spring materially. Do not worry. We shall have plenty of snow-storms yet, and still spring will be here practically on time."

But instead of snow the vapor-burdened air relieved itself by a rain of several hours' duration, and in the morning the river that had been so white looked icy and glistening, and by the aid of a glass was seen to be covered with water, which rippled under the rising breeze. The following night was clear and cold, and the surface of the bay became a comparatively smooth glare of ice. At dinner next day Webb remarked:

"I hear that they are catching a good many striped bass through the ice, and I learned that the tide would be right for them to raise the nets this afternoon. I propose, Amy, that we go down and see the process, and get some of the fish direct from the water for supper."

Burt groaned, and was almost jealous that during his enforced confinement so many opportunities to take Amy out fell naturally to Webb. The latter, however, was so entirely fraternal in his manner towards the young girl that Burt was ever able to convince himself that his misgivings were absurd.

Webb was soon ready, and had provided himself with his skates and a small sleigh with a back. When they arrived at the landing he tied his horse, and said:

"The ice is too poor to drive on any longer, I am informed, but perfectly safe still for foot-passengers. As a precaution we will follow the tracks of the fishermen, and I will give you a swift ride on this little sledge, in which I can wrap you up well."

Like most young men brought up in the vicinity, he was a good and powerful skater, and Amy was soon enjoying the exhilarating sense of rapid motion over the smooth ice, with a superb view of the grand mountains rising on either side of the river a little to the south. They soon reached the nets, which stretched across the river through narrow longitudinal cuts so as to be at right angles to each tide, with which the fish usually swim. These nets are such in shape as were formerly suspended between the old-fashioned shad-poles, and are sunk perpendicularly in the water by weights at each end, so that the meshes are expanded nearly to their full extent. The fish swim into these precisely as do the shad, and in their attempts to back out their gills catch, and there they hang.

The nets are about twelve feet square, and the meshes of different nets are from two and a half to five and a quarter inches in size. A bass of nine pounds' weight can be "gilled" in the ordinary manner; but in one instance a fish weighing one hundred and two pounds was caught, and during the present season they were informed that a lucky fisherman at Marlborough had secured "a 52-pounder." These heavy fellows, it was explained, "would go through a net like a cannon-ball" if they came "head on," and with ordinary speed; but if they are playing around gently, the swift tide carries them sideways into the "slack of the net," from which they seem unable to escape. There are usually about forty-five feet between the surface of the water and the top of the nets, therefore the fish are caught at an average depth of fifty feet. The best winter fishing is from December to March, and as many as one hundred and seventy pounds, or about two hundred bass, have been taken in twenty-four hours from one line of nets; at other times the luck is very bad, for the fish seem to run in streaks.

The luck was exceedingly moderate on the present occasion, but enough fish were caught to satisfy Webb's needs. As they were watching the lifting of the nets and angling for information, they saw an ice-boat slowly and gracefully leaving the landing, and were told that since the ice had grown thin it had taken the place of the sleigh in which the passengers were conveyed to and from the railroad station on the farther shore. The wind, being adverse, necessitated several tacks, and on one of them the boat passed so near Webb and Amy that they recognized Mr. Barkdale, the clergyman, who, as he sped by, saluted them. When the boat had passed on about an eighth of a mile, it tacked so suddenly and sharply that the unwary minister was rolled out upon the ice. The speed and impetus of the little craft were so great that before it could be brought up it was about half a mile away, and the good man was left in what might be a dangerous isolation, for ice over which the boat could skim in security might be very unsafe under the stationary weight of a solidly built man like Mr. Barkdale. Webb therefore seized a pole belonging to one of the fishermen, and came speedily to the clergyman's side. Happily the ice, although it had wasted rapidly from the action of the tide in that part of the river, sustained them until the boat returned, and the good man resumed his journey with laughing words, by which he nevertheless conveyed to Webb his honest gratitude for the promptness with which the young fellow had shared his possible danger. when Webb returned he found Amy pale and agitated, for an indiscreet fisherman had remarked that the ice was "mighty poor out in that direction."

"Won't you please come off the river?" she asked, nervously. "I've seen all I wish."

"It's perfectly safe here."

"But you were not here a moment since, and I've no confidence in your discretion when any one is in danger."

"I did not run any risks worth speaking of."

"I think you did. The men explained, in answer to my questions, that the ice towards spring becomes honey-combed — that's the way they expressed it — and lets one through without much warning. They also said the tides wore it away underneath about as fast as the rain and sun wasted the surface."

"Supposing it had let me through, I should have caught on the pole, and so have easily scrambled out, while poor Mr. Barkdale would have been quite helpless."

"Oh, I know it was right for you to go, and I know you will go again should there be the slightest occasion. Therefore I am eager to reach solid ground. Please, Webb."

Her tone was so earnest that he complied, and they were soon in the sleigh again. As they were driving up the hill she turned a shy glance towards him, and said, hesitatingly: "Don't mistake me, Webb. I am proud to think that you are so brave and uncalculating at times; but then I — I never like to think that you are in danger. Remember how very much you are to us all."

"Well, that is rather a new thought to me. Am I much to you?"

"Yes, you are," she said, gravely and earnestly, looking him frankly in the face. "From the first moment you spoke to me as 'sister Amy' you made the relation seem real. And then your manner is so strong and even that it's restful to be with you. You may give one a terrible fright, as you did me this afternoon, but you would never make one nervous."

His face flushed with deep pleasure, but he made good her opinion by quietly changing the subject, and giving her a brisk, bracing drive over one of her favorite roads.

All at the supper table agreed that the striped bass were delicious, and Burt, as the recognized sportsman of the family, had much to say about the habits of this fine game fish. Among his remarks he explained that the "catch" was small at present because the recent rain and melting snow had made the water of the river so fresh that the fish had been driven back towards the sea. "But they re-ascend," he said, "as soon as the freshet subsides. They are a sea fish, and only ascend fresh-water streams for shelter in winter, and to breed in spring. They spawn in May, and by August the little fish will weigh a quarter of a pound. A good many are taken with seines after the ice breaks up, but I never had any luck with pole and line in the river. While striped bass are found all along the coast from Florida to Cape Cod, the largest fish are taken between the latter place and Montauk Point. I once had some rare sport off the east end of Long Island. I was still-fishing, with a pole and reel, and fastened on my hook a peeled shedder crab. My line was of linen, six hundred feet long, and no heavier than that used for trout, but very strong. By a quick movement which an old bass-fisherman taught me I made my bait dart like an arrow straight over the water more than one hundred feet, my reel at the same moment whirling, in paying out, as if it would fuse from friction. Well, I soon hooked a fifty-pound fish, and we had a tussle that I shall never forget. It took me an hour to tire him out, and I had to use all the skill I possessed to keep him from breaking the line. It was rare sport, I can tell you — the finest bit of excitement I ever had fishing;" and the young fellow's eyes sparkled at the memory.

Strange as it may appear to some, his mother shared most largely in his enthusiasm. The reason was that, apart from the interest which she took in the pleasure of all her children, she lived much in her imagination, which was unusually strong, and Burt's words called up a marine picture with an athletic young fellow in the foreground all on the *qui vive*, his blue eyes flashing with the sparkle and light of the sea as he matched his skill and science against a creature stronger than himself. "Are larger bass ever taken with rod and line?" she asked.

"Yes, one weighing seventy-five pounds has been captured. Jupiter! what sport it must have been!"

"How big do they grow, anyhow?" Leonard queried.

"To almost your size, Len, and that's a heavy compliment to the bass. They have been known to reach the weight of one hundred and fifty pounds."

CHAPTER XVIII.

PLANNING AND OPENING THE CAMPAIGN.

THE last day of February was clear, cloudless, and cold, the evening serene and still. Winter's tempestuous course was run, its icy breath apparently had ceased, and darkness closed on its quiet, pallid face.

"March came in like a lamb" — an ominous circumstance for the future record of this month of most uncertain weather, according to the traditions of the old weather-prophets. The sun rose clear and warm, the snow sparkled and melted, the bluebirds rejoiced, and their soft notes of mutual congratulation found many echoes among their human neighbors. By noon the air was wonderfully soft and balmy, and Webb brought in a number of sprays from peach-trees cut in different parts of the place, and redeemed his promise to Amy, showing her the fruit germs, either green, or rather of a delicate gold-color, or else blackened by frost. She was astonished to find how perfect the embryo blossom appeared under the microscope. It needed no glass, however, to reveal the blackened heart of the bud, and Webb, having cut through a goodly number, remarked: "It would now appear as if nature had performed a very important labor for us, for I find about eight out of nine buds killed. It will save us thinning the fruit next summer, for if one ninth of the buds mature into peaches they will not only bring more money, but will measure more by the bushel."

"How can one peach measure more than eight peaches?"

"By being larger than the eight. If all these buds grew into peaches, and were left on these slender boughs, the tree might be killed outright by overbearing, and would assuredly be much injured and disfigured by broken limbs and exhaustion, while the fruit itself would be so small and poor as to be unsalable. Thousands of trees annually perish from this cause, and millions of peaches are either not picked, or, if marketed, may bring the grower into debt for freight and other expenses. A profitable crop of peaches can only be grown by careful hand-thinning when they are as large as marbles, unless the frost does the work for us by killing the greater part of the buds. It is a dangerous ally, however, for our constant fear is that it will destroy *all* the buds. There are plenty left yet, and I find that cherry, apple, plum, and pear buds are still safe. Indeed, there is little fear for them as long as peach buds are not entirely destroyed, for they are much hardier."

In the afternoon Burt, who had become expert in the use of crutches, determined on an airing, and invited Amy to join him. "I now intend to begin giving you driving lessons," he said. "You will soon acquire entire confidence, for skill, far more than strength, is required. As long as one keeps cool and shows no fear there is rarely danger. Horses often catch their senseless panic from their drivers, and, even when frightened with good cause, can usually be re-assured by a few quiet words and a firm rein."

Amy was delighted at the prospect of a lesson in driving, especially as Burt, because of his lameness, did not venture to take his over-spirited steed Thunder. She sincerely hoped, however, that he would confine his thoughts and attentions to the ostensible object of the drive, for his manner at times was embarrassingly ardent. Burt was sufficiently politic to fulfil her hope, for he had many other drives in view, and had discovered that attentions not fraternal were unwelcome to Amy. With a self-restraint and prudence which he thought most praiseworthy and sagacious, but which were ludicrous in their limitations, he resolved to take a few weeks to make the impression which he had often succeeded in producing in a few hours, judging from the relentings and favors received in a rather extended career of gallantry, although it puzzled the young fellow that he could have been so fascinated on former occasions. He merely proposed that now she should enjoy the drive so thoroughly that she would wish to go again, and his effort met with entire success.

During the first week of March there were many indications of the opening campaign on the Clifford farm. There was the overhauling and furbishing of weapons, otherwise tools, and the mending or strengthening of those in a decrepit state. A list of such additional ones as were wanted was made at this time, and an order sent for them at once. Amy also observed that practical Leonard was conning several catalogues of implements. "Len is always on the scent of some new patent hoe or cultivator," Burt remarked. "My game pays better than yours," was the reply, "for the right kind of tools about doubles the effectiveness of labor."

The chief topic of discussion and form of industry at this time were the pruning and cleansing of trees, and Amy often observed Webb from her windows in what seemed to her most perilous positions in the tops of apple and other trees, with saw and pruning shears or nippers — a light little instrument with such a powerful leverage that a good-sized bough could be lopped away by one slight pressure of the hand.

"It seems to me," remarked Leonard, one evening, "that there is much diversity of opinion in regard to the time and method of trimming trees. While the majority of our neighbors prune in March, some say fall or winter is the best time. Others are in favor of June, and in some paper I've read, 'Prune when your knife is sharp.' As for cleansing the bark of the trees, very few take the trouble."

"Well," replied his father, "I've always performed these labors in March with good results. I have often observed that taking off large limbs from old and feeble trees is apt to injure them. A decay begins at the point of amputation and extends down into the body of the tree. Sap-suckers and other woodpeckers, in making their nests, soon excavate this rotten wood back into the trunk, to which the moisture of every storm is admitted, and the life of the tree is shortened."

At this point Webb went out, and soon returned with something like exultation blending with his usually grave expression.

"I think father's views are correct, and I have confirmation here in autograph letters from three of the most eminent horticulturists in the world — "

"Good gracious, Webb! don't take away our breath in that style," exclaimed Burt. "Have you autograph letters from several autocrats also?"

As usual Webb ignored his brother's nonsense, and resumed: "The first is from the Hon. Marshall P. Wilder, President of the American Pomological Society, and is as follows: 'I prune my trees early in March, as soon as the heavy frosts are over, when the sap is dormant. If the branch is large I do not cut quite close in, and recut close in June, when the wound heals more readily. I do not approve of rigorous pruning of old trees showing signs of feebleness. Such operations would increase decline — only the dead wood should be removed, the loss of live wood depriving old trees of the supply of sap which they need for support. Grafting-wax is good to cover the wounds of trees, or a thick paint of the color of the bark answers well. Trees also may be pruned in safety in June after the first growth is made — then the wounds heal quickly.'

"The next letter is from Mr. Charles Downing, editor of 'The Fruits and Fruit-Trees of America.' 'When the extreme cold weather is over,' he says, 'say the last of February or first of March, begin to trim trees, and finish as rapidly as convenient. Do not trim a tree too much at one time, and cut no large limbs if possible, but thin out the small branches. If the trees are old and bark-bound, scrape off the roughest bark and wash the bodies and large limbs with whale-oil soap, or soft-soap such as the farmers make, putting it on quite thick. Give the ground plenty of compost manure, bone-dust, ashes, and salt. The best and most convenient preparation for covering wounds is gum-shellac dissolved in alcohol to the thickness of paint, and put on with a brush.' The last is from Mr. Patrick Barry, of the eminent Rochester firm, and author of 'The Fruit Garden.' 'In our climate pruning may be done at convenience, from the fall of the leaf until the 1st of April. In resuscitating old neglected apple-trees, *rigorous* pruning may be combined with ploughing and manuring of the ground. For covering wounds made in pruning, nothing is better than common grafting-wax laid on warm with a brush.' Hon. P. T. Quinn, in his work on 'Pear Culture' writes: 'On our own place we begin to prune our pear-trees from the 1st to the 15th of March, and go on with the work through April. It is not best to do much cutting, except on very young trees, while the foliage is coming out.'"

"Well," remarked Leonard, "I can go to work to-morrow with entire content; and very pleasant work it is, too, especially on the young trees, where by a little forethought and a few cuts one can regulate the form and appearance of the future tree."

"How is that possible?" Amy asked.

"Well, you see there are plenty of buds on all the young branches, and we can cut a branch just above the bud we wish to grow, which will continue to grow in the direction in which it points. Thus we can shape each summer's growth in any direction we choose."

"How can you be sure to find a bud just where you want it?"

"I know we always do."

"Of course we do," said Webb, "for buds are arranged spirally on trees in mathematical order. On most trees it is termed the 'five-ranked arrangement,' and every bud is just two-fifths of the circumference of the stem from the next. This will bring every sixth bud or leaf over the first, or the one we start with. Thus in the length of stem occupied by five buds you have buds facing in five different directions — plenty of choice for all pruning purposes."

"Oh, nonsense, Webb; you are too everlastingly scientific. Buds and leaves are scattered at hap-hazard all over the branches."

"That shows you observe at hap-hazard. Wait, and I'll prove I'm right;" and he seized his hat and went out. Returning after a few minutes with long, slender shoots of peach, apple, and pear trees, he said: "Now put your finger on any bud, and count. See if the sixth bud does not stand invariably over the one you start from, and if the intervening buds do not wind spirally twice around the stem, each facing in a different direction."

The result proved Webb to be right. He laughed, and said: "There, Len, you've seen buds and branches for over forty years, and never noticed this. Here, Alf, you begin right, and learn to see things just as they are. There's no telling how often accurate knowledge may be useful."

"But, Webb, all plants have not the five-ranked arrangement, as you term it," his mother protested.

"Oh no. There is the two-ranked, in which the third leaf stands over the first; the three-ranked, in which the fourth leaf stands over the first. Then we also find the eighth and thirteenth ranked arrangements, according to the construction of various species of plants or trees. But having once observed an arrangement of buds or leaves in a species, you will find it maintained with absolute symmetry and accuracy, although the spaces between the buds lengthwise upon the stem may vary very much. Nature, with all her seeming carelessness and *abandon*, works on strict mathematical principles."

"Well," said Alf, "I'm going to see if you are right to-morrow. I don't half believe you are." And on the following day he tried his best to prove Webb wrong, but failed.

Before the week was over there was a decided return of winter. The sky lost its spring like blue. Cold, ragged clouds were driven wildly by a northeast gale, which, penetrating the heaviest wraps, caused a shivering sense of discomfort. Only by the most vigorous exercise could one cope with the raw, icy wind, and yet the effort to do so brought a rich return in warm, purified blood. All out-door labor, except such as required strong, rapid action, came to an end, for it was the very season and opportunity for pneumonia to seize upon its chilled victim. To a family constituted like the Cliffords such weather brought no *ennui*. They had time for more music and reading aloud than usual. The pets in the flower-room needed extra care and watching, for the bitter wind searched out every crevice and cranny. Entering the dining-room on one occasion, Amy found the brothers poring over a map spread out on the table.

"What! studying geography?" she said. "It certainly is a severe stress of weather that has brought you all to that. What countries are you exploring?"

"These are our Western Territories," Burt promptly responded. "This prominent point here is Fort Totem, and these indications of adjacent buildings are for the storage of furs, bear-meat, and the accommodation of Indian hunters." Burt tried to look serious, but Webb's and Leonard's laughter betrayed him. Amy turned inquiringly to Webb, as she ever did when perplexed.

"Don't mind Burt's chaff," he said. "This is merely a map of the farm, and we are doing a little planning for our spring work — deciding what crop we shall put on that field and how treat this one, etc. You can see, Amy, that each field is numbered, and here in this book are corresponding numbers, with a record of the crops grown upon each field for a good many years back, to what extent and how often they have been enriched, and the kind of fertilizers used. Of course such a book of manuscript would be the dreariest prose in the world to you, but it is exceedingly interesting to us; and what's more, these past records are the best possible guides for future action."

"Oh, I know all about your book now," she said, with an air of entire confidence, "for I've heard papa say that land and crop records have been kept in England for generations. I don't think I will sit up nights to read your manuscript, however. If Burt's version had been true, it might have been quite exciting."

She did enjoy aiding Mr. and Mrs. Clifford in overhauling the seed-chest, however. This was a wooden box, all tinned over to keep out the mice, and was divided into many little compartments, in which were paper bags of seeds, with the date on which they were gathered or purchased. Some of the seeds were condemned because too old; others, like those of melons and cucumbers, improved with a moderate degree of age, she was told. Mrs. Clifford brought out from her part of the chest a rich store of flower seeds, and the young girl looked with much curiosity on the odd-appearing little grains and scale-like objects in which, in miniature, was wrapped some beautiful and fragrant plant. "Queer little promises, ain't they?" said the old lady; "for every seed is a promise to me."

"I tell you what it is, Amy," the old gentleman remarked, "this chest contains the assurance of many a good dinner and many a beautiful bouquet. Now, like a good girl, help us make an inventory. We will first have a list of what we may consider trustworthy seeds on hand, and then, with the aid of these catalogues, we can make out another list of what we shall buy. Seed catalogues, with their long list of novelties, never lose their fascination for me. I know that most of the new things are not half so good as the old tried sorts, but still I like to try some every year. It's a harmless sort of gambling, you see, and now and then I draw a genuine prize. Mother has the gambling mania far worse than I, as is evident from the way she goes into the flower novelties."

"I own up to it," said Mrs. Clifford, "and I do love to see the almost endless diversity in beauty which one species of plants will exhibit. Why, do you know, Amy, I grew from seeds one summer fifty distinct varieties of the dianthus. Suppose we take asters this year, and see how many distinct kinds we can grow. Here, in this catalogue, is a long list of named varieties, and, in addition, there are packages of mixed seeds from which we may get something distinct from all the others."

"How full of zest life becomes in the country," cried Amy, "if one only goes to work in the right way!" Life was growing fuller and richer to her every day in the varied and abounding interests of the family with which she was now entirely identified.

"Webb," his mother asked at dinner, "how do you explain the varying vitality of seeds? Some we can keep six or eight years, and others only two."

"That's a question I am unable to answer. It cannot be the amount of material stored up in the cotyledons, or embryo seed leaves, for small seeds like the beet and cucumber will retain their vitality ten years, and lettuce, turnip, and tomato seed five or more years, while I do not care to plant large, fleshy seeds like pease and beans that are over three years old, and much prefer those gathered the previous season. The whole question of the germinating of seeds is a curious one. Wheat taken from the wrappings of an Egyptian mummy has grown. Many seeds appear to have a certain instinct when to grow, and will lie dormant in the ground for indefinite periods waiting for favorable conditions. For instance, sow wood-ashes copiously and you speedily have a crop of white clover. Again, when one kind of timber is cut from land, another and diverse kind will spring up, as if the soil were full of seeds that had been biding their time. For all practical purposes the duration of vitality is known, and is usually given in seed catalogues, I think, or ought to be."

"Some say that certain fertilizers or conditions will produce certain kinds of vegetation without the aid of seeds — just develop them, you know," Leonard remarked.

"Develop them from what?"

"That's the question."

"Well, I think the sensible answer is that all vegetation is developed from seeds, spores, or whatever was designed to continue the chain of being from one plant to another. For the life of me I can't see how mere organic or inorganic matter can produce life. It can only sustain and nourish the life which exists in it or is placed in it, and which by a law of nature develops when the conditions are favorable. I am quite sure that there is not an instance on record of the spontaneous production of life, even down to the smallest animalcule in liquids, or the minutest plant life that is propagated by invisible spores. That the microscope does not reveal these spores or germs proves nothing, for the strongest microscope in the world has not begun to reach the final atom of which matter is composed. Indeed, it would seem to be as limited in its power to explore the infinitely little and near as the telescope to reveal the infinitely distant and great. Up to this time science has discovered nothing to contravene the assurance that God, or some one, 'created every living creature that moveth, and every herb yielding seed after his kind.' After a series of most careful and accurate experiments, Professor Tyndall could find no proof of the spontaneous production of even microscopic life, and found much proof to the contrary. How far original creations are changed or modified by evolution, natural selection, is a question that is to be settled neither by dogmatism on the one hand, nor by baseless theories on the other, but by facts, and plenty of them."

"Do you think there is anything atheistical in evolution?" his mother asked, and with some solicitude in her large eyes, for, like all trained in the old beliefs, she felt that the new philosophies led away into a realm of vague negations. Webb understood her anxiety lest the faith she had taught him should become unsettled, and he re-assured her in a characteristic way.

"No, mother," he said. "If evolution is the true explanation of the world, as it now appears to us, it is no more atheistical than some theologies I have heard preached, which contained plenty of doctrines and attributes, but no God. If God with his infinite leisure chooses to evolve his universe, why shouldn't he? In any case a creative, intelligent power is equally essential. It would be just as easy for me to believe that all the watches and jewelry at Tiffany's were the result of fortuitous causes as to believe that the world as we find it has no mind back of it."

Mother smiled with satisfaction, for she saw that he still stood just where she did, only his horizon had widened.

"Well," said his father, contentedly, "I read much in the papers and magazines of theories and isms of which I never heard when I was young, but eighty years of experience have convinced me that the Lord reigns."

They all laughed at this customary settlement of knotty problems on the part of the old gentleman, and Burt, rising from the table, looked out, with the remark that the prospects were that "the Lord would rain heavily that afternoon." The oldest and most infallible weather-prophet in the region — Storm King — was certainly giving portentous indications of a storm of no ordinary dimensions. The vapor was pouring over its summit in Niagara-like volume, and the wind, no longer rushing with its recent boisterous roar, was moaning and sighing as if nature was in pain and trouble. The barometer, which had been low for two days, sank lower; the temperature rose as the gale veered to the eastward. This fact, and the moisture-laden atmosphere, indicated that it came from the Gulf Stream region of the Atlantic. The rain, which began with a fine drizzle, increased fast, and soon fell in blinding sheets. The day grew dusky early, and the twilight was brief and obscure; then followed a long night of Egyptian darkness, through which the storm rushed, warred, and splashed with increasing vehemence. Before the evening was over, the sound of tumultuously flowing water became an appreciable element in the uproar without, and Webb, opening a window on the sheltered side of the house, called Amy to hear the torrents pouring down the sides of Storm King.

"What tremendous alternations of mood Nature indulges in!" she said, as she came shivering back to the fire. "Contrast such a night with a sunny June day."

"It would seem as if 'mild, ethereal spring' had got her back up," Burt remarked, "and regarding the return of winter as a trespass, had taken him by the throat, determined to have it out once for all. Something will give way before morning, probably half our bridges."

"Well, that *is* a way of explaining the jar among the elements that I had not thought of," she said, laughing.

"You needn't think Webb can do all the explaining. I have my theories also — sounder than his, too, most of 'em."

"There is surely no lack of sound accompanying your theory to-night. Indeed, it is not all 'sound and fury'!"

"It's all the more impressive, then. What's the use of your delicate, weak-backed theories that require a score of centuries to substantiate them?"

"Your theory about the bridges will soon be settled," remarked Leonard, ominously, "and I fear it will prove correct. At this rate the town will have to pay for half a dozen new ones — bridges, I mean."

"Well amended," added Webb.

"Just hear the rain!" said Leonard, ruefully. There was a heavy body of snow still in the mountains and on northern slopes, and much ice on the streams and ponds. "There certainly will be no little trouble if this continues."

"Don't worry, children," said Mr. Clifford, quietly. "I have generally found everything standing after the storms were over."

CHAPTER XIX.

WINTER'S EXIT.

THE old house seemed so full of strange sounds that Amy found it impossible to sleep. Seasoned as were its timbers, they creaked and groaned, and the casements rattled as if giant hands were seeking to open them. The wind at times would sigh and sob so mournfully, like a human voice, that her imagination peopled the darkness with strange creatures in distress, and then she would shudder as a more violent gust raised the prolonged wail into a loud shriek. Thoughts of her dead father — not the resigned, peaceful thoughts which the knowledge of his rest had brought of late — came surging into her mind. Her organization was peculiarly fine and especially sensitive to excited atmospherical conditions, and the tumult of the night raised in her mind an irrepressible, although unreasoning, panic. At last she felt that she would scream if she remained alone any longer. She put on her wrapper, purposing to ask Mrs. Leonard to come and stay with her for a time, feeling assured that if she could only speak to some one, the horrid spell of nervous fear would be broken. As she stepped into the hall she saw a light gleaming from the open door of the sitting-room, and in the hope that some one was still up, she stole noiselessly down the stairway to a point that commanded a view of the apartment. Only Webb was there, and he sat quietly reading by the shaded lamp and flickering fire. The scene and his very attitude suggested calmness and safety. There was nothing to be afraid of, and he was not afraid. With every moment that she watched him the nervous agitation passed from mind and body. His strong, intent profile proved that he was occupied wholly with the thought of his author. The quiet deliberation with which he turned the leaves was more potent than soothing words. "I wouldn't for the world have him know I'm so weak and foolish," she said to herself, as she crept noiselessly back to her room. "He little dreamed who was watching him," she whispered, smilingly, as she dropped asleep.

When she waked next morning the rain had ceased, the wind blew in fitful gusts, and the sky was still covered with wildly hurrying clouds that seemed like the straggling rear-guard which the storm had left behind. So far as she could see from her window, everything was still standing, as Mr. Clifford had said. Familiar objects greeted her re-assuringly, and never before had the light even of a lowering morning seemed more blessed in contrast with the black, black night. As she recalled the incidents of that night — her nervous panic, and the scene which had brought quiet and peace — she smiled again, and, it must be admitted, blushed slightly. "I wonder if he affects others as he does me," she thought. "Papa used to say, when I was a little thing, that I was just a bundle of nerves, but when Webb is near I am not conscious I ever had a nerve."

Every little brook had become a torrent; Moodna Creek was reported to be in angry mood, and the family hastened through breakfast that they might drive out to see the floods and the possible devastation. Several bridges over the smaller streams had barely escaped, and the Idlewild brook, whose spring and summer music the poet Willis had caused to be heard even in other lands, now gave forth a hoarse roar from the deep glen through which it raved. An iron bridge over the Moodna, on the depot road, had evidently been in danger in the night. The ice had been piled up in the road at each end of the bridge, and a cottage a little above it was surrounded by huge cakes. The inmates had realized their danger, for part of their furniture had been carried to higher ground. Although the volume of water passing was still immense, all danger was now over. As they were looking at the evidences of the violent breaking up of winter, the first phœbe-bird of the season alighted in a tree overhanging the torrent, and in her plaintive notes seemed to say, as interpreted by John Burroughs, "If you please, spring has come." They gave the brown little harbinger such an enthusiastic welcome that she speedily took flight to the farther shore.

"Where was that wee bit of life last night?" said Webb; "and how could it keep up heart?"

"Possibly it looked in at a window and saw some one reading," thought Amy; and she smiled so sweetly at the conceit that Webb asked, "How many pennies will you take for your thoughts?"

"They are not in the market;" and she laughed outright as she turned away.

"The true place to witness the flood will be at the old red bridge farther down the stream," said Leonard; and they drove as rapidly as the bad wheeling permitted to that point, and found that Leonard was right. Just above the bridge was a stone dam, by which the water was backed up a long distance, and a precipitous wooded bank rose on the south side. This had shielded the ice from the sun, and it was still very thick when the pressure of the flood came upon it. Up to this time it had not given way, and had become the cause of an ice-gorge that every moment grew more threatening. The impeded torrent chafed and ground the cakes together, surging them up at one point and permitting them to sink at another, as the imprisoned waters struggled for an outlet. The solid ice still held near the edge of the dam, although it was beginning to lift and crack with the tawny flood pouring over, under, and around it.

"Suppose we cross to the other side, nearest home," said Burt, who was driving; and with the word he whipped up the horses and dashed through the old covered structure.

"You ought not to have done that, Burt," said Webb, almost sternly. "The gorge may give way at any moment, and the bridge will probably go with it. We shall now have to drive several hundred yards to a safe place to leave the horses, for the low ground on this side will probably be flooded."

"It certainly will be," added Leonard.

"Oh, make haste!" cried Amy; and they all noticed that she was trembling.

But a few minutes sufficed to tie the horses and return to a point of safety near the bridge. "I did not mean to expose you to the slightest danger," Burt whispered, tenderly, to Amy. "See, the bridge is safe enough, and we might drive over it again."

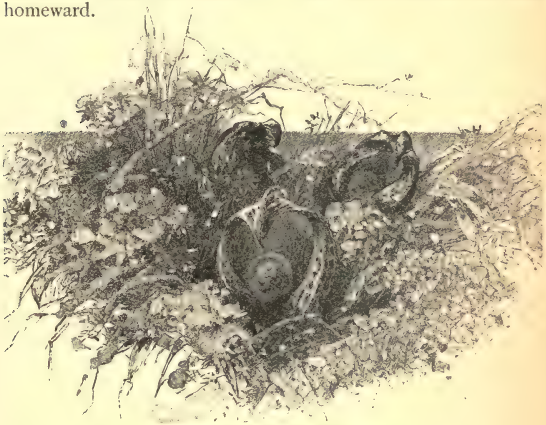
Even as he spoke there was a long grinding, crunching sound. A great volume of black water had forced its way under the gorge, and now lifted it bodily over the dam. It sank in a chaotic mass, surged onward and upward again, struck the bridge, and in a moment lifted it from its foundations and swept it away, a shattered wreck, the red covering showing in the distance like ensanguined stains among the tossing cakes of ice.

They all drew a long breath, and Amy was as pale as if she had witnessed the destruction of some living creature. No doubt she realized what would have been their fate had the break occurred while they were crossing.

"Good-by, old bridge," said Leonard, pensively. "I played and fished under you when a boy, and in the friendly dusk of its cover I kissed Maggie one summer afternoon of our courting days —"

"Well, well," exclaimed Burt, "the old bridge's exit has been a moving object in every sense, since it has evoked such a flood of sentiment from Len. Let us take him home to Maggie at once."

As they were about to depart they saw Dr. Marvin driving down to the opposite side, and they mockingly beckoned him to cross the raging torrent. He shook his head ruefully, and returned up the hill again. A rapid drive through the Moodna Valley brought them to the second bridge, which would evidently escape, for the flats above it were covered with *dèbris* and ice, and the main channel was sufficiently clear to permit the flood to pass harmlessly on. They then took the river road homeward.



THE SWAMP CABBAGE FLOWER.

The bridge over the Idlewild brook, near its entrance into the Moodna, was safe, although it had a narrow graze. They also found that the ice in the river at the mouth of the creek had been broken up in a wide semicircle, and as they ascended a hill that commanded an extensive view of Newburgh Bay they saw that the ice remaining had a black, sodden appearance.

"It will all break up in a few hours," said Burt, "and then hurrah for duck-shooting!"

Although spring had made such a desperate onset the previous night, it seemed to have gained but a partial advantage over winter. The weather continued raw and blustering for several days, and the overcast sky permitted but chance and watery gleams of sunshine. Slush and mud completed the ideal of the worst phase of March. The surface of the earth had apparently returned to that period before the dry land was made to appear. As the frost came out of the open spaces of the garden, ploughed fields, and even the country roads, they became quagmires in which one sank indefinitely. Seeing the vast advantage afforded to the men-folk by rubber boots, Amy provided herself with a pair, and with something of the exultation of the ancient Hebrews passed dry-shod through the general moisture.

CHAPTER XX.

A ROYAL CAPTIVE.

IN the midst of this dreary transition period Nature gave proof that she has unlimited materials of beauty at her command at any time. Early one afternoon the brothers were driven in from their out-door labors by a cold, sleety rain, and Leonard predicted an ice-storm. The next morning the world appeared as if heavily plated with silver. The sun at last was unclouded, and as he looked over the top of Storm King his long-missed beams transformed the landscape into a scene of wonder and beauty beyond anything described in Johnnie's fairy tales. Trees, shrubs, the roofs and sidings of the buildings, the wooden and even the stone fences, the spires of dead grass, and the unsightly skeletons of weeds, were all incased in ice and touched by the magic wand of beauty. The mountain-tops, however, surpassed all other objects in the transfigured world, for upon them a heavy mist had rested and frozen, clothing every branch and spray with a feathery frost-work of crystals, which, in the sun-lighted distance, was like a great shock of silver hair. There were drawbacks, however, to this marvellous scene. There were not a few branches already broken from the trees, and Mr. Clifford said that if the wind rose the weight of the ice would cause great destruction. They all hastened through breakfast, Leonard and Webb that they might relieve the more valuable fruit and evergreen trees of the weight of ice, and Burt and Amy for a drive up the mountain.

As they slowly ascended, the scene under the increasing sunlight took on every moment more strange and magical effects. The ice-incased twigs and boughs acted as prisms, and reflected every hue of the rainbow, and as they approached the summit the feathery frost-work grew more and more exquisitely delicate and beautiful, and yet it was proving to be as evanescent as a dream, for in all sunny places it was already vanishing. They had scarcely passed beyond the second summit when Burt uttered an exclamation of regretful disgust. "By all that's unlucky," he cried, "if there isn't an eagle sitting on yonder ledge! I could kill him with bird-shot, and I haven't even a popgun with me."

"It's too bad," sympathized Amy. "Let us drive as near as we can, and get a good view before he flies."

To their great surprise, he did not move as they approached, but only glared at them with his savage eye.

"Well," said Burt, "after trying for hours to get within rifle range, this exceeds anything I ever saw. I wonder if he is wounded and cannot fly." Suddenly he sprang out, and took a strap from the harness. "Hold the horse, Amy. I think I know what is the trouble with his majesty, and we may be able to return with a royal captive."

He drew near the eagle slowly and warily, and soon perceived that he was incased in ice from head to foot, and only retained the power of slightly moving his head. The creature was completely helpless, and must remain so until his icy fetters thawed out. His wings were frozen to his sides, his legs covered with ice, as were also his talons, and the dead branch of a low pine on which he had perched hours before. Icicles hung around him, making a most fantastic fringe. Only his defiant eye and open beak could give expression to his untamed, undaunted spirit. It was evident that the bird made a fierce internal struggle to escape, but was held as in a vise.

Burt was so elated that his hand trembled with eagerness; but he resolved to act prudently, and grasping the bird firmly but gently by the neck, he succeeded in severing the branch upon which the eagle was perched, for it was his purpose to exhibit the bird just as he had found him. Having carefully carried his prize to the buggy, he induced Amy, who viewed the creature with mingled wonder and alarm, to receive this strange addition to their number for the homeward journey. He wrapped her so completely with the carriage robe that the eagle could not injure her with his beak, and she saw he could no more move in other respects than a block of ice. As an additional precaution, Burt passed the strap around the bird's neck and tied him to the dash-board. Even with his heavy gloves he had to act cautiously, for the eagle in his disabled state could still strike a powerful blow. Then, with an exultation beyond all words, he drove to Dr. Marvin's, in order to have one of the "loudest crows" over him that he had ever enjoyed. The doctor did not mind the "crow" in the least, but was delighted with the adventure and capture, for the whole affair had just the flavor to please him. As he was a skilful taxidermist, he good-naturedly promised to "set the eagle up" on the self-same branch on which he had been found, for it was agreed that he would prove too dangerous a pet to keep in the vicinity of the irrepressible little Ned. Indeed, from the look of this fellow's eye, it was evident that he would be dangerous to any one. "I will follow you home, and after you have exhibited him we will kill him scientifically. He is a splendid specimen, and not a feather need be ruffled."

Burt drove around to the Rev. Mr. Barkdale's and some others of his nearest neighbors and friends in a sort of triumphal progress; but Amy grew uneasy at her close proximity to so formidable a companion, fearing that he would thaw out. Many were the exclamations of wonder and curiosity when they reached home. Alf went nearly wild, and little Johnnie's eyes overflowed with tears when she learned that the regal bird must die. As for Ned, had he not been restrained he would have given the eagle a chance to devour him.

"So, Burt, you have your eagle after all," said his mother, looking with more pleasure and interest on the flushed, eager face of her handsome boy than upon his captive. "Well, you and Amy have had an adventure."

"I always have good fortune and good times when you are with me," Burt whispered in an aside to Amy.

"Always is a long time," she replied, turning away; but he was too excited to note that she did not reciprocate his manner, and he was speedily engaged in a discussion as to the best method of preserving the eagle in the most life-like attitude. After a general family council it was decided that his future perch should be in a corner of the parlor, and within a few days he occupied it, looking so natural that callers were often startled by his life-like appearance.

"Think how his mate must miss him!" Maggie would often say, remorsefully.

As the day grew old the ice on the trees melted and fell away in myriads of gemlike drops. Although the sun shone brightly, there was a sound without as of rain. By four in the afternoon the pageant was over, the sky clouded again, and the typical March outlook was re-established.

CHAPTER XXI.

SPRING'S HARBINGERS.

AMY was awakened on the following morning by innumerable bird-notes, not songs, but loud calls. Hastening to the window, she witnessed a scene very strange to her eyes. All over the grass of the lawn and on the ground of the orchard beyond was a countless flock of what seemed to her quarter-grown chickens. A moment later the voice of Alf resounded through the house, crying, "The robins have come!" Very soon nearly all the household were on the piazza to greet these latest arrivals from the South; and a pretty scene of life and animation they made, with their yellow bills, jaunty black heads, and brownish red breasts.

"*Turdus migratorius*, as the doctor would say," remarked Burt; "and migrants they are with a vengeance. Last night there was not one to be seen, and now here are thousands. They are on their way north, and have merely alighted to feed."

"Isn't it odd how they keep their distance from each other?" said Webb. "You can scarcely see two near together, but every few feet there is a robin, as far as the eye can reach. Yes, and there are some high-holders in the orchard also. They are shyer than the robins, and don't come so near the house. You can tell them, Amy, by their yellow bodies and brown wings. I have read that they usually migrate with the robins. I wonder how far this flock flew last — ah, listen!"

Clear and sweet came an exquisite bird-song from an adjacent maple. Webb took off his hat in respectful greeting to the minstrel.

"Why," cried Amy, "that little brown bird cannot be a robin."

"No," he answered, "that is my favorite of all the earliest birds — the song-sparrow. You remember what Dr. Marvin said about him the other evening? I have been looking for my little friend for a week past, and here he is. The great tide of migration has turned northward."

"He is my favorite too," said his father. "Every spring for over seventy years I remember hearing his song, and it is just as sweet and fresh to me as ever. Indeed, it is enriched by a thousand memories."

For two or three days the robins continued plentiful around the house, and their loud "military calls," as Burroughs describes them, were heard at all hours from before the dawn into the dusk of night, but they seemed to be too excited over their northward journey or their arrival at their old haunts to indulge in the leisure of song. They reminded one of the advent of an opera company. There was incessant chattering, a flitting to and fro, bustle and excitement, each one having much to say, and no one apparently stopping to listen. The majority undoubtedly continued their migration, for the great flocks disappeared. It is said that the birds that survive the vicissitudes of the year return to their former haunts, and it would seem that they drop out of the general advance as they reach the locality of the previous summer's nest, to which they are guided by an unerring instinct.

The evening of the third day after their arrival was comparatively mild, and the early twilight serene and quiet. The family were just sitting down to supper when they heard a clear, mellow whistle, so resonant and penetrating as to arrest their attention although doors and windows were closed. Hastening to the door they saw on the top of one of the tallest elms a robin, with his crimson breast lighted up by the setting sun, and his little head lifted heavenward in the utterance of what seemed the perfection of an evening hymn. Indeed, in that bleak, dim March evening, with the long, chill night fast falling and the stormy weeks yet to come, it would be hard to find a finer expression of hope and faith.

The robin is a bird of contrasts. Peculiarly domestic in his haunts and habits, he resembles his human neighbors in more respects than one. He is much taken up with his material life, and is very fond of indulging his large appetite. He is far from being æsthetic in his house or housekeeping, and builds a strong, coarse nest of the handiest materials and in the handiest place, selecting the latter with a confidence in boy-nature and cat-nature that is often misplaced. He is noisy, bustling, and important, and as ready to make a raid on a cherry-tree or a strawberry-bed as is the average youth to visit a melon-patch by moonlight. He has a careless, happy-go-lucky air, unless irritated, and then is as eager for a "square set-to" in robin fashion as the most approved scion of chivalry. Like man, he also seems to have a spiritual element in his nature; and, as if inspired and lifted out of his grosser self by the dewy freshness of the morning and the shadowy beauty of the evening, he sings like a saint, and his pure, sweet notes would never lead one to suspect that he was guilty of habitual gormandizing. He settles down into a good husband and father, and, in brief, reminds one of the sturdy English squire who is sincerely devout over his prayer-book on proper occasions, and between times takes all the goods the gods send.

In the morning little Johnnie came to the breakfast-table in a state of great excitement. It soon appeared that she had a secret that she would tell no one but Amy — indeed, she would not tell it, but show it; and after breakfast she told Amy to put on her rubber boots and come with her, warning curious Alf meanwhile to keep his distance. Leading the way to a sunny angle in the garden fence, she showed Amy the first flower of the year. Although it was a warm, sunny spot, the snow had drifted there to such an extent that the icy base of the drift still partially covered the ground, and through a weak place in the melting ice a snow-drop had pushed its green, succulent leaves and hung out its modest little blossom. The child, brought up from infancy to feel the closest sympathy with nature, fairly trembled with delight over this *avant-coureur* of the innumerable flowers which it was her chief happiness to gather. As if in sympathy with the exultation of the child, and in appreciation of all that the pale little blossom foreshadowed, a song-sparrow near trilled out its sweetest lay, a robin took up the song, and a pair of bluebirds passed overhead with their undulating flight and soft warble. Truly spring had come in that nook of the old garden, even though the mountains were still covered with snow, the river was full of floating ice, and the wind chill with the breath of winter. Could there have been a fairer or more fitting committee of reception than little Johnnie, believing in all things, hoping all things, and brown-haired, hazel-eyed Amy, with the first awakenings of womanhood in her heart?

CHAPTER XXII.

"FIRST TIMES."

AT last Nature was truly awakening, and color was coming into her pallid face. On every side were increasing movement and evidences of life. Sunny hillsides were free from snow, and the oozing frost loosed the hold of stones upon the soil or the clay of precipitous banks, leaving them to the play of gravitation. Will the world become level if there are no more upheavals? The ice of the upper Hudson was journeying towards the sea that it would never reach. The sun smote it, the high winds ground the honey-combed cakes together, and the ebb and flow of the tide permitted no pause in the work of disintegration. By the middle of March the blue water predominated, and adventurous steamers had already picked and pounded their way to and from the city.

Only those deeply enamoured of Nature feel much enthusiasm for the first month of spring; but for them this season possesses a peculiar fascination. The beauty that has been so cold and repellent is relenting — yielding, seemingly against her will, to a wooing that cannot be repulsed by even her harshest moods. To the vigilance of love, sudden, unexpected smiles are granted; and though, as if these were regretted, the frown quickly returns, it is often less forbidding. It is a period full of delicious, soul-thrilling "first times," the coy, exquisite beginnings of that final abandonment to her suitor in the sky. Although she veils her face for days with clouds, and again and again greets him in the dawn, wrapped in her old icy reserve, he smiles back his answer, and she cannot resist. Indeed, there soon come warm, still, bright days whereon she feels herself going, but does not even protest. Then, as if suddenly conscious of lost ground, she makes a passionate effort to regain her wintry aspect. It is so passionate as to betray her, so stormy as to insure a profounder relenting, a warmer, more tearful, and penitent smile after her wild mood is over. She finds that she cannot return to her former sustained coldness, and so at last surrenders, and the frost passes wholly from her heart.

To Alf's and Johnnie's delight it so happened that one of these gentlest moods of early spring occurred on Saturday — that weekly millennium of school-children. With plans and preparations matured, they had risen with the sun, and, scampering back and forth over the frozen ground and the remaining patches of ice and snow, had carried every pail and pan that they could coax from their mother to a rocky hillside whereon clustered a few sugar-maples. Webb, the evening before, had inserted into the sunny sides of the trees little wooden troughs, and from these the tinkling drip of the sap made a music sweeter than that of the robins to the eager boy and girl.

At the breakfast-table each one was expatiating on the rare promise of the day. Even Mrs. Clifford, awakened by the half-subdued clatter of the children, had seen the brilliant, rose-tinted dawn.

"The day cannot be more beautiful than was the night," Webb remarked. "A little after midnight I was awakened by a clamor from the poultry, and suspecting either two or four footed thieves, I was soon covering the hennery with my gun. As a result, Sir Mephitis, as Burroughs calls him, lies stark and stiff near the door. After watching awhile, and finding no other marauders abroad, I became aware that it was one of the most perfect nights I had ever seen. It was hard to imagine that, a few hours before, a gale had been blowing under a cloudy sky. The moonlight was so clear that I could see to read distinctly. So attractive and still was the night that I started for an hour's walk up the boulevard, and when near Idlewild brook had the fortune to empty the other barrel of my gun into a great horned owl. How the echoes resounded in the quiet night! The changes in April are more rapid, but they are on a grander scale this month."

"It seems to me," laughed Burt, "that your range of topics is even more sublime. From Sir Mephitis to romantic moonlight and lofty musings, no doubt, which ended with a screech-owl."

"The great horned is not a screech-owl, as you ought to know. Well, Nature is to blame for my alternations. I only took the goods the gods sent."

"I hope you did not take cold," said Maggie. "The idea of prowling around at that time of night!"

"Webb was in hopes that Nature might bestow upon him some confidences by moonlight that he could not coax from her in broad day. I shall seek better game than you found. Ducks are becoming plenty in the river, and all the conditions are favorable for a crack at them this morning. So I shall paddle out with a white coat over my clothes, and pretend to be a cake of ice. If I bring you a canvas-back, Amy, will you put the wishbone over the door?"

"Not till I have locked it and hidden the key."

Without any pre-arranged purpose the day promised to be given up largely to country sport. Burt had taken a lunch, and would not return until night, while the increasing warmth and brilliancy of the sunshine, and the children's voices from the maple grove, soon lured Amy to the piazza.

"Come," cried Webb, who emerged from the wood-house with an axe on his shoulder, "don rubber boots and wraps, and we'll improvise a maple-sugar camp of the New England style a hundred years ago. We should make the most of a day like this."

They soon joined the children on the hillside, whither Abram had already carried a capacious iron pot as black as himself.

On a little terrace that was warm and bare of snow, Webb set up cross-sticks in gypsy fashion, and then with a chain suspended the pot, the children dancing like witches around it. Mr. Clifford and little Ned now appeared, the latter joining in the eager quest for dry sticks. Not far away was a large tree that for several years had been slowly dying, its few living branches having flushed early in September, in their last glow, which had been premature and hectic. Dry sticks would make little impression on the sap that now in the warmer light dropped faster from the wounded maples, and therefore to supply the intense heat that should give them at least a rich syrup before night, Webb threw off his coat and attacked the defunct veteran of the grove. Amy watched his vigorous strokes with growing zest; and he, conscious of her eyes, struck strong and true. Leonard, not far away, was removing impediments from the courses, thus securing a more rapid flow of the water and promoting the drainage of the land. He had sent up his cheery voice from time to time, but now joined the group, to witness the fall of a tree that had been old when he had played near it like his own children to-day. The echoes of the ringing axe came back to them from an adjacent hillside; a squirrel barked and "snickered," as if he too were a party to the fun; crows overhead cawed a protest at the destruction of their ancient perch; but with steady and remorseless stroke the axe was driven through the concentric rings on either side into the tree's dead heart. At last, as fibre after fibre was cut away, it began to tremble. The children stood breathless and almost pitying as they saw the shiver, apparently conscious, which followed each blow. Something of the same callousness of custom with which the fall of a man is witnessed must blunt one's nature before he can look unmoved upon the destruction of a familiar tree.

As the dead maple trembled more and more violently, and at last swayed to and fro in the breathless air, Amy cried, "Webb! Webb! come away!"

She had hardly spoken when, with a slow and stately motion, the lofty head bowed; there was a rush through the air, an echoing crash upon the rocks. She sprang forward with a slight cry, but Webb, leaning his axe on the prostrate bole, looked smilingly at her, and said, "Why, Amy, there is no more danger in this work than in cutting a stalk of corn, if one knows how."

"There appears to be more," she replied. "I never saw a large tree cut down before, but have certainly read of people being crushed. Does it often happen?"

"No, indeed."

"By the way, Amy," said Leonard, "the wood-chopper that you visited with me is doing so well that we shall give him work on the farm this summer. There was a little wheat in all that chaff of a man, and it's beginning to grow. But the wife is a case. He says he would like to work where he can see you occasionally."

"I have been there twice with Webb since, and shall go oftener when the roads are better," she replied, simply.

"That's right, Amy; follow up a thing," said Mr. Clifford. "It's better to *help* one family than to try to help a dozen. That was a good clean cut, Webb," he added, examining the stump. "I dislike to see a tree haggled down."

"How strong you are, Webb!" said Amy. "I suppose that if you had lived a few hundred years ago you would have been hacking at people in the same way."

"And so might have been a hero, and won your admiration if you had lived then in some gray castle, with the floor of your bower strewn with rushes. Now there is no career for me but that of a plain farmer."

"What manly task was given long before knighthood, eh, Webb? Right royal was the commission, too. Was it not to subdue the earth? It seems to me that you are striving after the higher mastery, one into which you can put all your mind as well as muscle. Knocking people on the head wasn't a very high art."

"What! not in behalf of a distressed damsel?"

"I imagine there will always be distressed damsels in the world. Indeed, in fiction it would seem that many would be nothing if not distressed. You can surely find one, Webb, and so be a knight in spite of our prosaic times."

"I shall not try," he replied, laughing. "I am content to be a farmer, and am glad you do not think our work is coarse and common. You obtained some good ideas in England, Amy. The tastes of the average American girl incline too much towards the manhood of the shop and office. There, Len, I am rested now;" and he took the axe from his brother, who had been lopping the branches from the prostrate tree.

Amy again watched his athletic figure with pleasure as he rapidly prepared billets for the seething caldron of sap.

The day was indeed forming an illuminated page. The blue of the sky seemed intense after so many gray and steel-hued days, and there was not a trace of cloud. The flowing sap was not sweeter than the air, to which the brilliant sunlight imparted an exhilarating warmth far removed from sultriness. From the hillside came the woody odor of decaying leaves, and from the adjacent meadow the delicate perfume of grasses whose roots began to tingle with life the moment the iron grip of the frost relaxed. Sitting on a rock near the crackling fire, Amy made as fair a gypsy as one would wish to see. On every side were evidences that spring was taking possession of the land. In the hollows of the meadow at her feet were glassy pools, kept from sinking away by a substratum of frost, and among these migratory robins and high-holders were feeding. The brook beyond was running full from the melting of the snow in the mountains, and its hoarse murmur was the bass in the musical babble and tinkle of smaller rills hastening towards it on either side. Thus in all directions the scene was lighted up with the glint and sparkle of water. The rays of the sun idealized even the muddy road, of which a glimpse was caught, for the pasty clay glistened like the surface of a stream. The returning birds appeared as jubilant over the day as the children whose voices blended with their songs — as do all the sounds that are absolutely natural. The migratory tide of robins, song-sparrows, phœbes, and other early birds was still moving northward; but multitudes had dropped out of line, having reached their haunts of the previous year. The sunny hillside and its immediate vicinity seemed a favorite lounging-place both for the birds of passage and for those already at home. The excitement of travel to some, and the delight at having regained the scene of last year's love and nesting to others, added to the universal joy of spring, so exhilarated their hearts that they could scarcely be still a moment. Although the sun was approaching the zenith, there was not the comparative silence that pervades a summer noon. Bird calls resounded everywhere; there was a constant flutter of wings, as if all were bent upon making or renewing acquaintance — an occupation frequently interrupted by transports of song.

"Do you suppose they really recognize each other?" Amy asked Webb, as he threw down an armful of wood near her.

"Dr. Marvin would insist that they do," he replied, laughing. "When with him, one must be wary in denying to the birds any of the virtues and powers. He would probably say that they understood each other as well as we do. They certainly seem to be comparing notes, in one sense of the word at least. Listen, and you will hear at this moment the song of bluebird, robin, both song and fox sparrow, phœbe, blue jay, high-holder, and crow — that is, if you can call the notes of the last two birds a song."

"What a lovely chorus!" she cried, after a few moments' pause.

"Wait till two months have passed, and you will hear a grand symphony every morning and evening. All the members of our summer opera troupe do not arrive till June, and several weeks must still pass before the great star of the season appears."

"Indeed! and who is he, or she?"

"Both he and she — the wood-thrush and his mate. They are very aristocratic kin of these robins. A little before them will come two other blood-relations, Mr. and Mrs. Brown-thrasher, who, notwithstanding their family connection with the high-toned wood-thrush and jolly, honest robin, are stealthy in their manner, and will skulk away before you as if ashamed of something. When the musical fit is on them, however, they will sing openly from the loftiest tree-top, and with a sweetness, too, that few birds can equal."

"Why, Webb, you almost equal Dr. Marvin."

"Oh no; I only become acquainted with my favorites. If a bird is rare, though commonplace in itself, he will pursue it as if it laid golden eggs."

A howl from Ned proved that even the brightest days and scenes have their drawbacks. The little fellow had been prowling around among the pails and pans, intent on obtaining a drink of the sap, and thus had put his hand on a honey-bee seeking the first sweet of the year. In an instant Webb reached his side, and saw what the trouble was. Carrying him to the fire, he drew a key from his pocket, and pressed its hollow ward over the spot stung. This caused the poison to work out. Nature's remedy — mud — abounded, and soon a little moist clay covered the wound, and Amy took him in her arms and tried to pacify him, while his father, who had strolled away with Mr. Clifford, speedily returned. The grandfather looked down commiseratingly on the sobbing little companion of his earlier morning walk, and soon brought, not merely serenity, but joy unbounded, by a quiet proposition.

"I will go back to the house," he said, "and have mamma put up a nice lunch, and you and the other children can eat your dinner here by the fire. So can you, Webb and Amy, and then you can look after the youngsters. It's warm and dry here. Suppose you have a little picnic, which, in March, will be a thing to remember. Alf, you can come with me, and while mamma is preparing the lunch you can run to the market and get some oysters and clams, and these, with potatoes, you can roast in the ashes of a smaller fire, which Ned and Johnnie can look after under Webb's superintendence. Wouldn't you like my little plan, Amy?"

"Yes, indeed," she replied, putting her hands caressingly within his arm. "It's hard to think you are old when you know so well what we young people like. I didn't believe that this day could be brighter or jollier, and yet your plan has made the children half-wild."

Indeed, Alf had already given his approval by tearing off towards the house for the materials of this unprecedented March feast in the woods, and the old gentleman, as if made buoyant by the good promise of his little project in the children's behalf, followed with a step wonderfully elastic for a man of fourscore.

"Well, Heaven grant I may attain an age like that!" said Webb, looking wistfully after him. "There is more of spring than autumn in father yet, and I don't believe there will be any winter in his life. Well, Amy, like the birds and squirrels around us, we shall dine out-of-doors to-day. You must be mistress of the banquet; Ned, Johnnie, and I place ourselves under your orders: don't we, Johnnie?"

"To be sure, uncle Webb; only I'm so crazy over all this fun that I'm sure I can never do anything straight."

"Well, then, 'bustle! bustle!'" cried Amy. "I believe with Maggie that housekeeping and dining well are high arts, and not humdrum necessities. Webb, I need a broad, flat rock. Please provide one at once, while Johnnie gathers clean dry leaves for plates. You, Ned, can put lots of dry sticks between the stones there, and uncle Webb will kindle the right kind of a fire to leave plenty of hot coals and ashes. Now is the time for him to make his science useful."

Webb was becoming a mystery unto himself. Was it the exquisitely pure air and the exhilarating spring sunshine that sent the blood tingling through his veins? Or was it the presence, tones, and gestures of a girl with brow and neck like the snow that glistened on the mountain slopes above them, and large true eyes that sometimes seemed gray and again blue? Amy's developing beauty was far removed from a fixed type of prettiness, and he felt this in a vague way. The majority of the girls of his acquaintance had a manner rather than an individuality, and looked and acted much the same whenever he saw them. They were conventionalized after some received country type, and although farmers' daughters, they seemed unnatural to this lover of nature. Allowing for the difference in years, Amy was as devoid of self-consciousness as Alf or Johnnie. Not the slightest trace of mannerism perverted her girlish ways. She moved, talked, and acted with no more effort or thought of effort than had the bluebirds that were passing to and fro with their simple notes and graceful flight. She was nature in its phase of girlhood. To one of his temperament and training the perfect day itself would have been full of unalloyed enjoyment although occupied with his ordinary labors; but for some reason this unpremeditated holiday, with Amy's companionship, gave him a pleasure before unknown — a pleasure deep and satisfying, unmarred by jarring discords or uneasy protests of conscience or reason. Truly, on this spring day a "first time" came to him, a new element was entering into his life. He did not think of defining it; he did not even recognize it, except in the old and general way that Amy's presence had enriched them all, and in his own case had arrested a tendency to become materialistic and narrow. On a like day the year before he would have been absorbed in the occupations of the farm, and merely conscious to a certain extent of the sky above him and the bird song and beauty around him. To-day they were like revelations. Even a March world was transfigured. His zest in living and working was enhanced a thousand-fold, because life and work were illumined by happiness, as the scene was brightened by sunshine. He felt that he had only half seen the world before; now he had the joy of one gradually gaining vision after partial blindness.

Amy saw that he was enjoying the day immensely in his quiet way; she also saw that she had not a little to do with the result, and the reflection that she could please and interest the grave and thoughtful man, who was six years her senior, conveyed a delicious sense of power. And yet she was pleased much as a child would be. "He knows so much more than I do," she thought, "and is usually so wrapped up in some deep subject, or so busy, that it's awfully jolly to find that one can beguile him into having such a good time. Burt is so exuberant in everything that I am afraid of being carried away, as by a swift stream, I know not where. I feel like checking and restraining him all the time. For me to add my small stock of mirth to his immense spirits would be like lighting a candle on a day like this; but when I smile on Webb the effect is wonderful, and I can never get over my pleased surprise at the fact."

Thus, like the awakening forces in the soil around them, a vital force was developing in two human hearts equally unconscious.

Alf and his grandfather at last returned, each well laden, and preparations went on apace. Mr. Clifford made as if he would return and dine at home, but they all clamored for his company. With a twinkle in his eye, he said:

"Well, I told mother that I might lunch with you, and I was only waiting to be pressed a little. I've lived a good many years, but never was on a picnic in March before."

"Grandpa, you shall be squeezed as well as pressed," cried Johnnie, putting her arms about his neck. "You shall stay and see what a lovely time you have given us. Oh, if Cinderella were only here!" and she gave one little sigh, the first of the day.

"Possibly Cinderella may appear in time for lunch;" and with a significant look he directed Amy to the basket he had brought, from the bottom of which was drawn a doll with absurdly diminutive feet, and for once in her life Johnnie's heart craved nothing more.

"Maggie knew that this little mother could not be content long without her doll, and so she put it in. You children have a thoughtful mother, and you must be thoughtful of her," added the old man, who felt that the incident admitted of a little homily.

What appetites they all had! If some of the potatoes were slightly burned and others a little raw, the occasion added a flavor better than Attic salt. A flock of chickadees approached near enough to gather the crumbs that were thrown to them.

"It's strange," said Webb, "how tame the birds are when they return in the spring. In the fall the robins are among the wildest of the birds, and now they are all around us. I believe that if I place some crumbs on yonder rock, they'll come and dine with us, in a sense;" and the event proved that he was right.

"Hey, Johnnie," said her grandfather, "you never took dinner with the birds before, did you? This is almost as wonderful as if Cinderella sat up and asked for an oyster."

But Johnnie was only pleased with the fact, not surprised. Wonderland was her land, and she said, "I don't see why the birds can't understand that I'd like to have dinner with them every day."

"By the way, Webb," continued his father, "I brought out the field-glass with me, for I thought that with your good eyes you might see Burt;" and he drew it from his pocket.

The idea of seeing Burt shooting ducks nearly broke up the feast, and Webb swept the distant river, full of floating ice that in the sunlight looked like snow. "I can see several out in boats," he said, "and Burt, no doubt, is among them."

Then Amy, Alf, and Johnnie must have a look, but Ned devoted himself strictly to business, and Amy remarked that he was becoming like a little sausage.

"Can the glass make us hear the noise of the gun better?"

Johnnie asked, at which they all laughed, Ned louder than any, because of the laughter of the others. It required but a little thing to make these banqueters hilarious.

But there was one who heard them and did not laugh. From the brow of the hill a dark, sad face looked down upon them. Lured by the beauty of the day, Mr. Alvord had wandered aimlessly into the woods, and, attracted by merry voices, had drawn sufficiently near to witness a scene that awakened within him indescribable pain and longing. He did not think of joining them. It was not a fear that he would be unwelcomed that kept him away; he knew the family too well to imagine that. A stronger restraint was upon him. Something in the past darkened even that bright day, and built in the crystal air a barrier that he could not pass. They would give him a place at their rustic board, but he could not take it. He knew that he would be a discord in their harmony, and their innocent merriment smote his morbid nature with almost intolerable pain. With a gesture indicating immeasurable regret, he turned and hastened away to his lonely home. As he mounted the little piazza his steps were arrested. The exposed end of a post that supported the inner side of its roof formed a little sheltered nook in which a pair of bluebirds had begun to build their nest. They looked at him with curious and distrustful eyes as they flitted to and fro in a neighboring tree and he sat down and looked at them. The birds were evidently in doubt and in perturbed consultation. They would fly to the post, then away and all around the house, but scarcely a moment passed that Mr. Alvord did not see that he was observed and discussed. With singular interest and deep suspense he awaited their decision. At last it came, and was favorable. The female bird came flying to the post with a beakful of fine dry grass, and her mate, on a spray near, broke out into his soft, rapturous song. The master of the house gave a great sigh of relief. A glimmer of a smile passed over his wan face as he muttered, "I expected to be alone this summer, but I am to have a family with me, after all."

Soon after the lunch had been discussed leisurely and hilariously the maple-sugar camp was left in the care of Alf and Johnnie, with Abram to assist them. Amy longed for a stroll, but even with the protection of rubber boots she found that the departing frost had left the sodded meadow too wet and spongy for safety. Under Webb's direction she picked her way to the margin of the swollen stream, and gathered some pussy willows that were bursting their sheaths.

CHAPTER XXIII.

REGRETS AND DUCK-SHOOTING.

SATURDAY afternoon, as is usual in the country, brought an increased number of duties to the inhabitants of the farm-house, but at the supper hour they all, except Burt, looked back upon the day with unwonted satisfaction. He had returned weary, hungry, and discontented, notwithstanding the fact that several brace of ducks hung on the piazza as trophies of his skill. He was in that uncomfortable frame of mind which results from charging one's self with a blunder. In the morning he had entered on the sport with his usual zest, but it had soon declined, and he wished he had remained at home. He remembered the children's intention of spending the day among the maples, and as the sun grew warm, and the air balmy, the thought occurred with increasing frequency that he might have induced Amy to join them, and so have enjoyed long hours of companionship under circumstances most favorable to his suit. He now admitted that were the river alive with ducks, the imagined opportunities of the maple grove were tenfold more attractive. At one time he half decided to return, but pride prevented until he should have secured a fair amount of game. He would not go home to be laughed at. Moreover, Amy had not been so approachable of late as he could wish, and he proposed to punish her a little, hoping that she would miss his presence and attentions. The many reminiscences at the supper-table were not consoling. It was evident that he had not been missed in the way that he desired to be, and that the day had been one of rich enjoyment to her. Neither was Webb's quiet satisfaction agreeable, and Burt mildly anathematized himself at the thought that he might have had his share in giving Amy so much pleasure. He took counsel of experience, however, and having learned that even duck-shooting under the most favorable auspices palled when contrasted with Amy's smiles and society, he resolved to be present in the future when she, like Nature, was in a propitious mood. Impetuous as he was, he had not yet reached the point of love's blindness which would lead him to press his suit in season and out of season. He soon found a chance to inform Amy of his regret, but she laughed merrily back at him as she went up to her room, saying that the air of a martyr sat upon him with very poor grace in view of his success and persistence in the sport, and that he had better put a white mark against the day, as she had done.

Early in the evening Dr. Marvin appeared, with Mr. Marks, one of the most noted duck-shooters and fishermen on the river, and they brought in three superb specimens of a rare bird in this region, the American swan, that queen of water-fowls and embodiment of grace.

"Shot 'em an hour or two ago, near Polopel's Island," said Mr. Marks, "and we don't often have the luck to get within range of such game. Dr. Marvin was down visiting one of my children, and he said how he would like to prepare the skin of one, and he thought some of you folks here might like to have another mounted, and he'd do it if you wished."

Exclamations of pleasure followed this proposition. Alf examined them with deep interest, while Burt whispered to Amy that he would rather have brought her home a swan like one of those than all the ducks that ever quacked.

In accordance with their hospitable ways, the Cliffords soon had the doctor and Mr. Marks seated by their fireside, and the veteran sportsman was readily induced to enlarge upon some of his experiences.

He had killed two of the swans, he told them, as they were swimming, and the other as it rose. He did not propose to let any such uncommon visitors get away. He had never seen more than ten since he had lived in this region. With the proverbial experience of meeting game when without a gun, he had seen five fly over, one Sunday, while taking a ramble on Plum Point.

"Have you ever obtained any snow-geese in our waters?" Dr. Marvin asked.

"No. That's the scarcest water-fowl we have. Once in a wild snow-storm I saw a flock of about two hundred far out upon the river, and would have had a shot into them, but some fellows from the other side started out and began firing at long range, and that has been my only chance. I occasionally get some brant-geese, and they are rare enough. I once saw a flock of eight, and got them all — took five out of the flock in the first two shots — but I've never killed more than twenty-five in all."

"I don't think I have ever seen one," remarked Mrs. Clifford, who, in her feebleness and in her home-nook, loved to hear about these bold, adventurous travellers. They brought to her vivid fancy remote wild scenes, desolate waters, and storm-beaten rocks. The tremendous endurance and power of wing in these shy children of nature never ceased to be marvels to her. "Burt has occasionally shot wild-geese — we have one mounted there — but I do not know what a brant is, nor much about its habits," she added.

"Its markings are like the ordinary Canada wild-goose," Dr. Marvin explained, "and it is about midway in size between a goose and a duck."

"I've shot a good many of the common wild-geese in my time," Mr. Marks resumed; "killed nineteen four years ago. I once knocked down ten out of a flock of thirteen by giving them both barrels. I have a flock of eight now in a pond not far away — broke their wings, you know, and so they can't fly. They soon become tame, and might be domesticated easily, only you must always keep one wing cut, or they will leave in the spring or fall."

"How is that?"

"Well, they never lose their instinct to migrate, and if they heard other wild-geese flying over, they'd rise quick enough if they could and go with them."

"Do you think there would be any profit in domesticating them?" asked practical Leonard.

"There might be. I know a man up the river who used to cross them with our common geese, and so produced a hybrid, a sort of a mule-goose, that grew very large. I've known 'em to weigh eighteen pounds or more, and they were fine eating, I can tell you. I don't suppose there is much in it, though, or some cute Yankee would have made a business of it before this."

"How many ducks do you suppose you have shot all together?" Mr. Clifford asked.

"Oh, I don't know — a great many. Killed five hundred last fall."

"What's the greatest number you ever got out of a flock, Marks?" put in Burt.

"Well, there is the old squaw, or long-tailed duck. They go in big flocks, you know — have seen four or five hundred together. In the spring, just after they have come from feeding on mussels in the southern oyster-beds, they are fishy, but in the fall they are much better, and the young ducks are scarcely fishy at all. I've taken twenty-three out of a flock by firing at them in the water and again when they rose; and in the same way I once knocked over eighteen black or dusky ducks; and they are always fine, you know."

"Are the fancy kinds, like the mallards and canvas-backs that are in such demand by the epicures, still plentiful in their season?" Webb asked.

"No. I get a few now and then, but don't calculate on them any longer. It was my luck with canvas-backs that got me into my duck-shooting ways. I was cuffed and patted on the back the same day on their account."

In response to their laughing expressions of curiosity he resumed: "I was but a little chap at the time; still I believed I could shoot ducks, but my father wouldn't trust me with either a gun or boat, and my only chance was to circumvent the old man. So one night I hid the gun outside of the house, climbed out of a window as soon as it was light, and paddled round a point where I would not be seen, and I tell you I had a grand time. I did not come in till the middle of the afternoon, but I reached a point when I must have my dinner, no matter what came before it. The old man was waiting for me, and he cuffed me well. I didn't say a word, but went to my mother, and she, mother-like, comforted me with a big dinner which she had kept for me. I was content to throw the cuffing in, and still feel that I had the best of the bargain. An elder brother began to chaff me and ask, 'Where are your ducks?' 'Better go and look under the seat in the stern-sheets before you make any more faces,' I answered, huffily. I suppose he thought at first I wanted to get rid of him, but he had just enough curiosity to go and see, and he pulled out sixteen canvas-backs. The old man was reconciled at once, for I had made better wages than he that day; and from that time on I've had all the duck-shooting I've wanted."

"That's a form of argument to which the world always yields," said Leonard, laughing.

"How many kinds of wild-ducks do we have here in the bay, that you can shoot so many?" Maggie asked.

"I've never counted 'em up. The doctor can tell you, perhaps."

"I've prepared the skins of twenty-four different kinds that were shot in this vicinity," replied Dr. Marvin.

"Don't you and Mrs. Marvin dissect the birds also?" queried Leonard.

"Mr. Marks," said Mr. Clifford, "I think you once had a rather severe experience while out upon the river. Won't you tell us about it?"

"Yes. My favorite sport came nigh being the death of me, and it always makes me shiver to think of it. I started out one spring morning at five o'clock, and did not get home till two o'clock the next morning, and not a mouthful did I have to eat. I had fair success during the day, but was bothered by the quantities of ice running, and a high wind. About four o'clock in the afternoon I concluded to return home, for I was tired and hungry. I was then out in the river off Plum Point. I saw an opening leading south, and paddled into it, but had not gone far before the wind drove the ice in upon me, and blocked the passage. There I was, helpless, and it began to blow a gale. The wind held the ice immovable on the west shore, even though the tide was running out. For a time I thought the boat would be crushed by the grinding cakes in spite of all I could do. If it had, I'd 'a been drowned at once, but I worked like a Trojan, shouting, meanwhile, loud enough to raise the dead. No one seemed to hear or notice me. At last I made my way to a cake that was heavy enough to bear my weight, and on this I pulled up the boat, and lay down exhausted. It was now almost night, and I was too tired to shout any more. There on that mass of ice I stayed till two o'clock the next morning. I thought I'd freeze to death, if I did not drown. I shouted from time to time, till I found it was of no use, and then gave my thoughts to keeping awake and warm enough to live. I knew that my chance would be with the next turn of the tide, when the ice would move with it, and also the wind, up the river. So it turned out. I was at last able to break my way through the loosened ice to Plum Point, and then had a two-mile walk home; and I can tell you that it never seemed so like home before."

"Oh, Burt, please don't go out again when the ice is running," was his mother's comment on the story.

"Thoreau speaks of seeing black ducks asleep on a pond whereon thin ice had formed, enclosing them, during the March night," said Webb. "Have you ever caught them napping in this way?"

"No," replied Mr. Marks; "though it might easily happen on a still pond. The tides and wind usually break up the very thin ice on the river, and if there is any open water near, the ducks will stay in it."

"Dr. Marvin, have you caught any glimpses of spring to-day that we have not?" Amy asked.

The doctor laughed — having heard of Webb's exploit in the night near the hennery — and said: "I might mention that I have seen 'Sir Mephitis' cabbage, as I suppose I should call it, growing vigorously. It is about the first green thing we have. Around certain springs, however, the grass keeps green all winter, and I passed one to-day surrounded by an emerald hue that was distinct in the distance. It has been very cold and backward thus far."

"Possess your souls in patience," said Mr. Clifford. "Springtime and harvest are sure. After over half a century's observation I have noted that, no matter what the weather may have been, Nature always catches up with the season about the middle or last of June."

CHAPTER XXIV.

APRIL.

THE remainder of March passed quickly away, with more alternations of mood than there were days; but in spite of snow, sleet, wind, and rain, the most forbidding frowns and tempestuous tears, all knew that Nature had yielded, and more and more often she half-smilingly acknowledged the truth herself.

All sights and sounds about the farm-house betokened increasing activity. During the morning hours the cackling in the barn and out-buildings developed into a perfect clamor, for the more commonplace the event of a new-born egg became, the greater attention the hens were inclined to call to it. Possibly they also felt the spring-time impulse of all the feathered tribes to use their voice to the extent of its compass. The clatter was music to Alf and Johnnie, however, for gathering the eggs was one of their chief sources of revenue, and the hunting of nests — stolen so cunningly and cackled over so sillily — with their accumulated treasures was like prospecting for mines. The great basketful they brought in daily after their return from school proved that if the egg manufactory ran noisily, it did not run in vain. Occasionally their father gave them a peep into the dusky brooding-room. Under his thrifty management the majority of the nests were simply loose boxes, each inscribed with a number. When a biddy wished to sit, she was removed at night upon the nest, and the box was placed on a low shelf in the brooding-room. If she remained quiet and contented in the new location, eggs were placed under her, a note of the number of the box was taken, with the date, and the character of the eggs, if they represented any special breed. By these simple precautions little was left to what Squire Bartley termed "luck." Some of the hens had been on the nest nearly three weeks, and eagerly did the children listen for the first faint peep that should announce the senior chick of the year.

Webb and Burt had already opened the campaign in the garden. On the black soil in the hot-bed, which had been made in a sheltered nook, were even now lines of cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce, tomatoes, etc. These nursling vegetables were cared for as Maggie had watched her babies. On mild sunny days the sash was shoved down and air given. High winds and frosty nights prompted to careful covering and tucking away. The Cliffords were not of those who believe that pork, cabbage, and potatoes are a farmer's birthright, when by a small outlay of time and skill every delicacy can be enjoyed, even in advance of the season. On a warm slope from which the frost ever took its earliest departure; pease, potatoes, and other hardy products of the garden were planted, and as the ground grew firm enough, the fertilizers of the barn-yard were carted to the designated places, whereon, by Nature's alchemy, they would be transmuted into forms of use and beauty.

It so happened that the 1st of April was an ideal spring day. During the morning the brow of Storm King, still clothed with snow, was shrouded in mist, through which the light broke uncertainly in gleams of watery sunshine. A succession of showers took place, but so slight and mild that they were scarcely heeded by the busy workers; there was almost a profusion of half-formed rainbows; and atmosphere and cloud so blended that it was hard to say where one began and the other ceased. On every twig, dead weed, and spire of withered grass hung innumerable drops that now were water and again diamonds when touched by the inconstant sun. Sweet-fern grass abounded in the lawn, and from it exuded an indescribably delicious odor.

The birds were so ecstatic in their songs, so constant in their calls, that one might think that they, like the children, were making the most of All-fools' Day, and playing endless pranks on each other. The robins acted as if nothing was left to be desired. They were at this time in all stages of relationship. Some had already paired, and were at work upon their domiciles, but more were in the blissful and excited state of courtship, and their conversational notes, wooings, and pleadings, as they warbled the *pros* and *cons*, were quite different from their matin and vesper songs. Not unfrequently there were two aspirants for the same claw or bill, and the rivals usually fought it out like their human neighbors in the olden time, the red-breasted object of their affections standing demurely aloof on the sward, quietly watching the contest with a sidelong look, undoubtedly conscious, however, of a little feminine exultation that she should be sought thus fiercely by more than one. After all, the chief joy of the robin world that day resulted from the fact that the mild, humid air lured the earth-worms from their burrowing, and Amy laughed more than once as, from her window, she saw a little gourmand pulling at a worm, which clung so desperately to its hole that the bird at last almost fell over backward with its prize. Courtship, nest-building, family cares — nothing disturbs a robin's appetite, and it was, indeed, a sorry fools'-day for myriads of angle-worms that ventured out.

Managing a country place is like sailing a ship: one's labors are, or should be, much modified by the weather. This still day, when the leaves were heavy with moisture, afforded Webb the chance he had desired to rake the lawn and other grass-plots about the house, and store the material for future use. He was not one to attempt this task when the wind would half undo his labor.

In the afternoon the showery phase passed, and the sun shone with a misty brightness. Although so early in a backward spring, the day was full of the suggestion of wild flowers, and Amy and the children started on their first search into

Nature's calendar of the seasons. Alf knew where to look for the earliest blossoms, and in the twilight the explorers returned with handfuls of hepatica and arbutus buds, which, from experience, they knew would bloom in a vase of water. Who has ever forgotten his childish exultation over the first wild flowers of the year! Pale, delicate little blossoms though they be, and most of them odorless, their memory grows sweet with our age.

Burt, who had been away to purchase a horse — he gave considerable of his time to the buying and selling of these animals — drove up as Amy approached the house, and pleaded for a spray of arbutus.

"But the buds are not open yet," she said.

"No matter; I should value the spray just as much, since you gathered it."

"Why, Burt," she cried, laughing, "on that principle I might as well give you a chip." But she gave him the buds and escaped.

"Amy," Webb asked at the supper-table, "didn't you hear the peepers this afternoon while out walking?"

"Yes; and I asked Alf what they were. He said they were peepers, and that they always made a noise in the spring."

"Why, Alf," Webb resumed, in mock gravity, "you should have told Amy that the sounds came from the *Hylodes pickeringii*."

"If that is all that you can tell me," said Amy, laughing, "I prefer Alf's explanation. I have known people to cover up their ignorance by big words before. Indeed, I think it is a way you scientists have."

"I must admit it; and yet that close observer, John Burroughs, gives a charming account of these little frogs that we call 'hylas' for short. Shy as they are, and quick to disappear when approached, he has seen them, as they climb out of the mud upon a sedge or stick in the marshes, inflate their throats until they 'suggest a little drummer-boy with his drum hung high.' In this bubble-like swelling at its throat the noise is made; and to me it is a welcome note of spring, although I have heard people speak of it as one of the most lonesome and melancholy of sounds. It is a common saying among old farmers that the peepers must be shut up three times by frost before we can expect steady spring weather. I believe that naturalists think these little mites of frogs leave the mud and marshes later on, and become tree-toads. Let me give you a hint, Alf. Try to find out what you can at once about the things you see or hear: that's the way to get an education."

"May I not take the hint also?" Amy asked.

"Please don't think me a born pedagogue," he answered, smiling; "but you have no idea how fast we obtain knowledge of certain kinds if we follow up the object-lessons presented every day."

CHAPTER XXV.

EASTER.

EASTER-SUNDAY came early in the month, and there had been great preparations for it, for with the Cliffords it was one of the chief festivals of the year. To the children was given a week's vacation, and they scoured the woods for all the arbutus that gave any promise of opening in time. Clumps of bloodroot, hepaticas, dicentras, dog-tooth violets, and lilies-of-the-valley had been taken up at the first relaxation of frost, and forced in the flower-room. Hyacinth and tulip bulbs, kept back the earlier part of the winter, were timed to bloom artificially at this season so sacred to flowers, and, under Mrs. Clifford's fostering care, all the exotics of the little conservatory had been stimulated to do their best to grace the day. On Suturday afternoon Mr. Barkdale's pulpit was embowered with plants and vines growing in pots, tubs, and rustic boxes, and the good man beamed upon the work, gaining meanwhile an inspiration that would put a soul into his words on the morrow.

No such brilliant morning dawned on the worship of the Saxon goddess Eostre, in cloudy, forest-clad England in the centuries long past, as broke over the eastern mountains on that sacred day. At half-past five the sun appeared above the shaggy summit of the Beacon, and the steel hues of the placid Hudson were changed into sparkling silver. A white mist rested on the water between Storm King, Break Neck, and Mount Taurus. In the distance it appeared as if snow had drifted in and half filled the gorge of the Highlands. The orange and rose-tinted sky gradually deepened into an intense blue, and although the land was as bare and the forests were as gaunt as in December, a soft glamour over all proclaimed spring.

Spring was also in Amy's eyes, in the oval delicacy of her girlish face with its exquisite flush, in her quick, deft hands and elastic step as she arranged baskets and vases of flowers. Webb watched her with his deep eyes, and his Easter worship began early in the day. True homage it was, because so involuntary, so unquestioning and devoid of analysis, so utterly free from the self-conscious spirit that expects a large and definite return for adoration. His sense of beauty, the poetic capabilities of his nature, were kindled. Like the flowers that seemed to know their place in a harmony of color when she touched them, Amy herself was emblematic of Easter, of its brightness and hopefulness, of the new, richer spiritual life that was coming to him. He loved his homely work and calling as never before, because he saw how on every side it touched and blended with the beautiful and sacred. Its highest outcome was like the blossoms before him which had developed from a rank soil, dark roots, and prosaic woody stems. The grain he raised fed and matured the delicate human perfection shown in every graceful and unconscious pose of the young girl. She was Nature's priestess interpreting to him a higher, gentler world which before he had seen but dimly — interpreting it all the more clearly because she made no effort to reveal it. She led the way, he followed, and the earth ceased to be an aggregate of forms and material forces. With his larger capabilities he might yet become her master, but now, with an utter absence of vanity, he recognized how much she was doing for him, how she was widening his horizon and uplifting his thoughts and motives, and he reverenced her as such men ever do a woman that leads them to a higher plane of life.

No such deep thoughts and vague homage perplexed Burt as he assisted Amy with attentions that were assiduous and almost garrulous. The brightness of the morning was in his handsome face, and the gladness of his buoyant temperament in his heart. Amy was just to his taste — pretty, piquant, rose-hued, and a trifle thorny too, at times, he thought. He believed that he loved her with a boundless devotion — at least it seemed so that morning. It was delightful to be near her, to touch her fingers occasionally as he handed her flowers, and to win smiles, arch looks, and even words that contained a minute prick like spines on the rose stems. He felt sure that his suit would prosper in time, and she was all the more fascinating because showing no sentimental tendencies to respond with a promptness that in other objects of his attention in the past had even proved embarrassing. She was a little conscious of Webb's silent observation, and, looking up suddenly, caught an expression that deepened her color slightly.

"That for your thoughts," she said, tossing him a flower with sisterly freedom.

"Webb is pondering deeply," explained the observant Burt, "on the reflection of light as shown not only by the color in these flowers, but also in your cheeks under his fixed stare."

There was an access of rose-hued reflection at these words, but Webb rose quietly and said: "If you will let me keep the flower I will tell you my thoughts another time. They were quite suitable for Easter morning. That basket is now ready, and I will take it to the church."

Burt was soon despatched with another, while she and Johnnie, who had been flitting about, eager and interested, followed with light and delicate vases. To their surprise, Mr. Alvord intercepted them near the church vestibule. He had never been seen at any place of worship, and the reserve and dignity of his manner had prevented the most zealous from interfering with his habits. From the porch of his cottage he had seen Amy and the little girl approaching with their floral offerings. Nature's smile that morning had softened his bitter mood, and, obeying an impulse to look nearer upon two beings that belonged to another world than his, he joined them, and asked,

"Won't you let me see your flowers before you take them into the church?"

"Certainly," said Amy, cordially; "but there are lovelier ones on the pulpit; won't you come in and see them?"

He shook his head.

"What!" cried Johnnie, "not going to church to-day?" She had lost much of her fear of him, for in his rambles he frequently met her and Alf, and usually spoke to them. Moreover, she had repeatedly seen him at their fireside, and he ever had a smile for her. The morbid are often fearless with children, believing that, like the lower orders of life, they have little power to observe that anything is amiss, and therefore are neither apt to be repelled nor curious and suspicious. This in a sense is true, and yet their instincts are keen. But Mr. Alvord was not selfish or coarse; above all he was not harsh. To Johnnie he only seemed strange, quiet, and unhappy, and she had often heard her mother say, "Poor Mr. Alvord!" Therefore, when he said, "I don't go to church; if I had a little girl like you to sit by me, I might feel differently," her heart was touched, and she replied, impulsively: "I'll sit by you, Mr. Alvord. I'll sit with you all by ourselves, if you will only go to church to-day. Why, it's Easter."

"Mr. Alvord," said Amy, gently, "that's an unusual offer for shy Johnnie to make. You don't know what a compliment you have received, and I think you will make the child very happy if you comply."

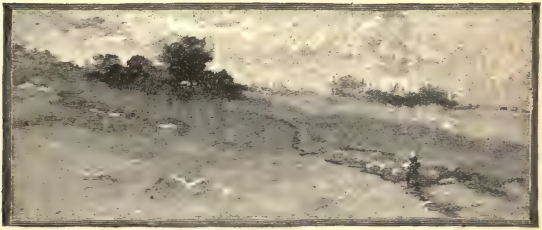
"Could I make you happier by sitting with you in church to-day?" he asked, in a low voice, offering the child his hand.

"Yes," she replied, simply.

"Come, then. You lead the way, for you know best where to go." She gave her vase to Amy, and led him into a side seat near her father's pew — one that she had noted as unoccupied of late. "It's early yet. Do you mind sitting here until service begins?" he asked.

"Oh no. I like to sit here and look at the flowers;" and the first comers glanced wonderingly at the little girl and her companion, who was a stranger to them and to the sanctuary. Amy explained matters to Leonard and Maggie at the door when they arrived, and Easter-Sunday had new and sweeter meanings to them.

The spring had surely found its way into Mr. Barkdale's sermon also, and its leaves, as he turned them, were not autumn leaves, which, even though brilliant, suggest death and sad changes. One of his thoughts was much commented upon by the Cliffords, when, in good old country style, the sermon was spoken of at dinner. "The God we worship," he said, "is the God of life, of nature. In his own time and way he puts forth his power. We can employ this power and make it ours. Many of you will do this practically during the coming weeks. You sow seed, plant trees, and seek to shape others into symmetrical form by pruning-knife and saw. What is your expectation? Why, that the great power that is revivifying nature will take up the work where you leave off, and carry it forward. All the skill and science in the world could not create a field



AN UPLAND MEADOW.

of waving grain, nor all the art one of these flowers. How immensely the power of God supplements the labor of man in those things which minister chiefly to his lower nature! Can you believe that he will put forth so much energy that the grain may mature and the flower bloom, and yet not exert far greater power that man himself may develop according to the capabilities of his being? The forces now exist in the earth and in the air to make the year fruitful, but you must intelligently avail yourselves of them. You must sow, plant, and cultivate. The power ever exists that can redeem us from evil, heal the wounds that sin has made, and develop the manhood and womanhood that Heaven receives and rewards. With the same resolute intelligence you must lay hold upon this ever-present spiritual force if you would be lifted up."

After the service there were those who would ostentatiously recognize and encourage Mr. Alvord; but the Cliffords, with better breeding, quietly and cordially greeted him, and that was all. At the door he placed Johnnie's hand in her mother's, and gently said, "Good-by;" but the pleased smile of the child and Mrs. Leonard followed him. As he entered his porch, other maternal eyes rested upon him, and the brooding bluebird on her nest seemed to say, with Maggie, "I am not afraid of you." Possibly to the lonely man this may prove Easter-Sunday in very truth, and hope, that he had thought buried forever, come from its grave.

In the afternoon all the young people started for the hills, gleaning the earliest flowers, and feasting their eyes on the sunlit landscapes veiled with soft haze from the abundant moisture with which the air was charged. As the sun sank low in the many-hued west, and the eastern mountains clothed themselves in royal purple, Webb chanced to be alone, near Amy, and she said,

"You have had that flower all day, and I have not had your thoughts."

"Oh yes, you have — a great many of them."

"You know that isn't what I mean. You promised to tell me what you were thinking about so deeply this morning."

He looked at her smilingly a moment, and then his face grew gentle and grave as he replied: "I can scarcely explain, Amy. I am learning that thoughts which are not clear-cut and definite may make upon us the strongest impressions. They cause us to feel that there is much that we only half know and half understand as yet. You and your flowers seemed to interpret to me the meaning of this day as I never understood it before. Surely its deepest significance is life, happy, hopeful life, with escape from its grosser elements, and as you stood there you embodied that idea."

"Oh, Webb," she cried, in comic perplexity, "you are getting too deep for me. I was only arranging flowers, and not thinking about embodying anything. But go on."

"If you had been, you would have spoiled everything," he resumed, laughing. "I can't explain; I can only suggest the rest in a sentence or two. Look at the shadow creeping up yonder mountain — very dark blue on the lower side of the moving line and deep purple above. Listen to these birds around us. Well, every day I see and hear and appreciate these things better, and I thought that you were to blame."

"Am I very much to blame?" she inquired, archly.

"Yes, very much," was his laughing answer. "It seems to me that a few months since I was like the old man with the muck-rake in 'Pilgrim's Progress,' seeking to gather only money, facts, and knowledge — things of use. I now am finding so much that is useful which I scarcely looked at before that I am revising my philosophy, and like it much better. The simple truth is, I needed just such a sister as you are to keep me from plodding."

Burt now appeared with a handful of rue-anemones, obtained by a rapid climb to a very sunny nook. They were the first of the season, and he justly believed that Amy would be delighted with them. But the words of Webb were more treasured, for they filled her with a pleased wonder. She had seen the changes herself to which he referred; but how could a simple girl wield such an influence over the grave, studious man? That was the puzzle of puzzles. It was an enigma that she would be long in solving, and yet the explanation was her own simplicity, her truthfulness to all the conditions of unaffected girlhood.

On the way to the house Webb delighted Johnnie and Alf by gathering sprays of the cherry, peach, pear, and plum, saying, "Put them in water by a sunny window, and see which will bloom first, these sprays or the trees out-of-doors." The supper-table was graced by many woodland trophies — the "tawny pendants" of the alder that Thoreau said dusted his coat with sulphur-like pollen as he pressed through them to "look for mud-turtles," pussy willows now well developed, the hardy ferns, arbutus, and other harbingers of spring, while the flowers that had been brought back from the church filled the room with fragrance. To gentle Mrs. Clifford, dwelling as she ever must among the shadows of pain and disease, this was the happiest day of the year, for it pointed forward to immortal youth and strength, and she loved to see it decked and garlanded like a bride. And so Easter passed, and became a happy memory.

CHAPTER XXVI.

VERY MOODY.

THE next morning Amy, on looking from her window, could scarcely believe she was awake. She had retired with her mind full of spring and spring-time beauty, but the world without had now the aspect of January. The air was one swirl of snow, and trees, buildings — everything was white. In dismay she hastened to join the family, but was speedily reassured.

"There is nothing monotonous in American weather, and you must get used to our sharp alternations," said Mr. Clifford. "This snow will do good rather than harm, and the lawn will actually look green after it has melted, as it will speedily. The thing we dread is a severe frost at a far later date than this. The buds are still too dormant to be injured, but I have known the apples to be frozen on the trees when as large as walnuts."

"Such snows are called the poor man's manure," Webb remarked, "and fertilizing gases, to a certain amount, do become entangled in the large wet flakes, and so are carried into the soil. But the poor man will assuredly remain poor if he has no other means of enriching his land. What a contrast to yesterday! The house on the northeast side looks as if built of snow, so evenly is it plastered over. I pity the birds. They have scarcely sung this morning, and they look as if thoroughly disgusted."

Amy and Johnnie shared in the birds' disapproval, but Alf had a boy's affinity for snow, and resolved to construct an immense fort as soon as the storm permitted. Before the day had far declined the heavy flakes ceased, and the gusty wind died away. Johnnie forgot the budding flowers in their winding-sheet, and joyously aided in the construction of the fort. Down the sloping lawn they rolled the snow-balls, that so increased with every revolution that they soon rose above the children's heads, and Webb and Burt's good-natured help was required to pile them into ramparts. At the entrance of the stronghold an immense snow sentinel was fashioned, with a cord-wood stick for a musket. The children fairly sighed for another month of winter.

All night long Nature, in a heavy fall of rain, appeared to weep that she had been so capricious, and the morning found her in as uncomfortable a mood as could be imagined. The slush was ankle-deep, with indefinite degrees of mud beneath, the air chilly and raw, and the sky filled with great ragged masses of cloud, so opaque and low that they appeared as if disrupted by some dynamic force, and threatened to fall upon the shadowed land. But between them the sun darted many a smile at his tear-stained mistress. At last they took themselves off like ill-affected meddlers in a love match, and the day grew bright and warm. By evening, spring, literally and figuratively, had more than regained lost ground, for, as Mr. Clifford had predicted, the lawn had a distinct emerald hue. Thenceforth the season moved forward as if there were to be no more regrets and nonsense. An efficient ally in the form of a southwest wind came to the aid of the sun, and every day Nature responded with increasing favor. Amy no more complained that an American April was like early March in England; and as the surface of the land grew warm and dry it was hard for her to remain in-doors, there was so much of life, bustle, and movement without. Buds were swelling on every side. Those of the lilac were nearly an inch long, and emitted a perfume of the rarest delicacy, far superior to that of the blossoms to come. The nests of the earlier birds were in all stages of construction, and could be seen readily in the leafless trees. Snakes were crawling from their holes, and lay sunning themselves in the roads, to her and Johnnie's dismay. Alf captured turtles that, deep in the mud, had learned the advent of spring as readily as the creatures of the air. The fish were ascending the swollen streams. " Each rill," as Thoreau wrote, " is peopled with new life rushing up it." Abram and Alf were planning a momentous expedition to a tumbling dam on the Moodna, the favorite resort of the sluggish suckers. New chicks were daily breaking their shells, and their soft, downy, ball-like little bodies were more to Amy's taste than the peepers of the marsh.

One Saturday morning Alf rushed in, announcing with breathless haste that " Kitten had a calf." Kitten was a fawn-colored Alderney, the favorite of the barn-yard, and so gentle that even Johnnie did not fear to rub her rough nose, scratch her between her horns, or bring her wisps of grass when she was tied near the house. Her calf was unlike all other calves. There was no rest until Amy had seen it, and she admitted that she had never looked upon a more innocent and droll little visage. At the children's pleading the infant cow was given to them, but they were warned to leave it for the present to Abram and Kitten's care, for the latter was inclined to act like a veritable old cat when any one made too free with her bovine baby.

This bright Saturday occurring about the middle of the month completely enthroned spring in the children's hearts. The air was sweet with fragrance from the springing grass and swelling buds, and so still and humid that sounds from other farms and gardens, and songs from distant fields and groves, blended softly yet distinctly with those of the immediate vicinage. The sunshine was warm, but veiled by fleecy clouds; and as the day advanced every member of the family was out-of-doors, even to Mrs. Clifford, for whom had been constructed, under her husband's direction, a low garden-chair which was so light that even Alf or Amy could draw it easily along the walks.

From it she stepped down on her first visit of the year to her beloved flower-beds, which Alf and Burt were putting in order for her, the latter blending with his filial attentions the hope of seeing more of Amy. Nor was he unrewarded, for his manner towards his mother, whom he alternately petted and chaffed, while at the same time doing her bidding with manly tenderness, won the young girl's hearty good-will. The only drawback was his inclination to pet her furtively even more. She wished that Webb was preparing the flower-beds, for then there would be nothing to perplex or worry her. But he, with his father and Leonard, was more prosaically employed, for they were at work in the main or vegetable garden. It was with a sense of immense relief that she heard Mrs. Clifford, after she had given her final directions, and gloated over the blooming crocuses and daffodils, and the budding hyacinths and tulips, express a wish to join her husband.

"Come back soon," pleaded Burt.

"I'm your mother's pony to-day," she replied, and hastened away. A wide path bordered on either side by old-fashioned perennials and shrubbery led down through the garden. Amy breathed more freely as soon as she gained it, and at once gave herself up to the enjoyment of the pleasing sights and sounds on every side. Mr. Clifford was the picture of placid content as he sat on a box in the sun, cutting potatoes into the proper size for planting. Johnnie was perched on another box near, chattering incessantly as she handed him the tubers, and asking no other response than the old gentleman's amused smile. Leonard with a pair of stout horses was turning up the rich black mould, sinking his plough to the beam, and going twice in a furrow. It would require a very severe drought to affect land pulverized thus deeply, for under Leonard's thorough work the root pasturage was extended downward eighteen inches. On the side of the plot nearest to the house Webb was breaking the lumps and levelling the ground with a heavy iron-toothed rake, and also forking deeply the ends of the furrows that had been trampled by the turning horses. Leaving Mrs. Clifford chatting and laughing with her husband and Johnnie, Amy stood in the walk opposite to him, and he said presently:

"Come, Amy, you can help me. You said you wanted a finger in our horticultural pies, and no doubt had in your mind nothing less plebeian than flower seeds and roses. Will your nose become *retroussé* if I ask you to aid me in planting parsnips, oyster-plant, carrots, and — think of it! — onions?"

"The idea of my helping you, when the best I can do is to amuse you with my ignorance! But I'll put on no airs. I do not look forward to an exclusive diet of roses, and am quite curious to know what part I can have in earning my daily vegetables."

"A useful and typical part — that of keeping straight men and things in general. Wait a little;" and taking up a coiled garden line, he attached one end of it to a stout stake pressed firmly into the ground. He then walked rapidly over the levelled soil to the farther side of the plot, drew the line "taut," as the sailors say, and tied it to another stake. He next returned towards Amy, making a shallow drill by drawing a sharp-pointed hoe along under the line. From a basket near, containing labelled packages of seeds, he made a selection, and poured into a bowl something that looked like gunpowder grains, and sowed it rapidly in the little furrow. "Now, Amy," he cried, from the farther side of the plot, "do you see that measuring-stick at your feet? Place one end of it against the stake to which the line is fastened, and move the stake with the line forward to the other end of the measuring-stick, just as I am doing here. That's it. You now see how many steps you save me, and how much faster I can get on."

"Are those black-looking grains you are sowing seed?"

"Indeed they are, as a few weeks may prove to you by more senses than one. These are the seeds of a vegetable inseparable in its associations from classic Italy and renowned in sacred story. You may not share in the longings of the ancient

Hebrews, but with its aid I could easily bring tears of deep feeling to your eyes."

"The vegetable is more pungent than your wit, Webb," she laughed; but she stood near the path at the end of the line, which she moved forward from time to time as requested, meanwhile enjoying an April day that lacked few elements of perfection.

The garden is one of the favorite haunts of the song-sparrow. In the flower-border near, Amy would hear such a vigorous scratching among the leaves that she might well believe that a motherly hen was at work, but presently one of these little sober-coated creatures that Thoreau well calls a "ground-bird" would fly to the top of a plum-tree and trill out a song as sweet as the perfume that came from the blossoming willows not far away. The busy ploughs made it a high festival for the robins, for with a confidence not misplaced they followed near in the furrows that Leonard was making in the garden, and that Abram was turning on an adjacent hillside, and not only the comparatively harmless earth-worms suffered, but also the pestiferous larvæ of the May-beetle, the arch-enemy of the strawberry-plant. Even on that day of such varied and etherealized fragrance, the fresh, wholesome odor of the upturned earth was grateful. Suddenly Webb straightened himself from the sowing of the scale-like parsnip-seed in which he was then engaged, and said, "Listen." Remote yet distinct, like a dream of a bird-song, came a simple melody from a distant field. "Welcome," he said. "That's our meadow-lark, Amy; not equal to your skylark, I admit. Indeed, it is not a lark at all, for Dr. Marvin says it belongs to the oriole family. Brief and simple as is its song, I think you will agree with me that spring brings few more lovely sounds. That is the first one that I have heard this year."

She scarcely more than caught the ethereal song before Burt and Alf came down the path, trundling immense wheelbarrow-loads of the prunings of the shrubbery around the house. These were added to a great pile of brush and refuse that had accumulated on the other side of the walk, and to Alf was given the wild excitement of igniting the inflammable mass, and soon there was a fierce crackling as the flames devoured their way into the loose dry centre of the rejected *débris* of the previous year. Then to Alf and Johnnie's unmeasured delight they were permitted to improvise a miniature prairie fire. A part of the garden had been left to grow very weedy in the preceding summer, and they were shown how that by lighting the dry, dead material on the windward side, the flames, driven by a gentle western breeze, would sweep across the entire plot, leaving it bare and blackened, ready for the fertilizers and the plough. With merry cries they followed the sweeping line of fire, aiding it forward by catching up on iron rakes burning wisps and transferring them to spots in the weedy plot that did not kindle readily. Little Ned, clinging to the hand of Maggie, who had joined the family in the garden, looked on with awe-struck eyes. From the bonfire and the consuming weeds great volumes of smoke poured up and floated away, the air was full of pungent odors, and the robins called vociferously back and forth through the garden, their alarmed and excited cries vying with the children's shouts. In half an hour only a faint haze of smoke to the eastward indicated the brief conflagration; the family had gone to the house for their one-o'clock dinner, and the birds were content with the normal aspect of the old garden in April.

The promise of the bright spring day was not fulfilled. Cold rains followed by frosty mornings and high cool winds prevailed with depressing persistency. It required almost as much vigor, courage, and activity as had been essential in March to enjoy out-door life. In many of her aspects Nature appeared almost to stand still and wait for more genial skies, and yet for those who watched to greet and to welcome, the mighty impulse of spring manifested itself in many ways. The currant and gooseberry bushes, as if remembering their original haunts in dim, cold, boggy forests, put forth their foliage without hesitation. From the elm-trees swung the little pendent blossoms that precede the leaves. The lilacs and some other hardy shrubs grew green and fragrant daily. Nothing daunted, the crocuses, hyacinths, and tulips pushed upward their succulent leaves with steady resolution. In the woods the flowers had all kinds of experiences. On the north side of Storm King it was still winter, with great areas of December's ice unmelted. On the south side of the mountain, spring almost kept pace with the calendar. The only result was that the hardy little children of April, on which had hung more snow-flakes than dew, obtained a longer lease of blooming life, and could have their share in garlanding the May Queen. They bravely faced the frosty nights and drenching rains, becoming types of those lives whose beauty is only enhanced by adversity — of those who make better use of a little sunny prosperity to bless the world than others on whom good-fortune ever seems to wait.

The last Saturday of the month was looked forward to with hopeful expectations, as a genial earnest of May, and a chance for out-door pleasures; but with it came a dismal rain-storm, which left the ground as cold, wet, and sodden as it had been a month before. The backward season, of which the whole country was now complaining, culminated on the following morning, which ushered in a day of remarkable vicissitude. By rapid transition the rain passed into sleet, then snow, which flurried down so rapidly that the land grew white and wintry, making it almost impossible to imagine that two months of spring had passed. By 10 A.M. the whirling flakes ceased, but a more sullen, leaden, March-like sky never lowered over a cold, dripping earth. On the north side of the house a white hyacinth was seen hanging its pendent blossoms half in and half out of the snow, and Alf, who in response to Dr. Marvin's suggestion was following some of the family fortunes among the homes in the trees, came in and said that he had found nests well hidden by a covering all too cold, with the resolute mother bird protecting her eggs, although chilled, wet, and shivering herself. By 1 P.M. the clouds grew thin, rolled away, and disappeared. The sun broke out with a determined warmth and power, and the snow vanished like a spectre of the long-past winter. The birds took heart, and their songs of exultation resounded from far and near. A warm south breeze sprang up and fanned Amy's cheek, as she, with the children and Burt, went out for their usual Sunday-afternoon walk. They found the flowers looking up hopefully, but with melted snow hanging like tears on their pale little faces. The sun at last sank into the unclouded west, illumining the sky with a warm, golden promise for the future. Amy gazed at its departing glory, but Burt looked at her — looked so earnestly, so wistfully, that she was full of compunction even while she welcomed the return of the children, which delayed the words that were trembling on his lips. He was ready, she was not; and he walked homeward at her side silent and depressed, feeling that the receptive, responsive spring was later in her heart than in Nature.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHAD-FISHING BY PROXY.

ACCORDING to the almanac, May was on time to a second, but Nature seemed unaware of the fact. Great bodies of snow covered the Adirondack region, and not a little still remained all the way southward through the Catskills and the Highlands, about the head-waters of the Delaware, and its cold breath benumbed the land. Johnnie's chosen intimates had given her their suffrages as May Queen; but prudent Maggie had decided that the crowning ceremonies should not take place until May truly appeared, with its warmth and floral wealth. Therefore, on the first Saturday of the month, Leonard planned a half-holiday, which should not only compensate the disappointed children, but also give his busy wife a little outing. He had learned that the tide was right for crossing the shallows of the Moodna Creek, and they would all go fishing. Johnnie's friends and Dr. and Mrs. Marvin were invited, and great were the preparations. Reed and all kinds of poles were taken down from their hooks, or cut in a neighboring thicket, the country store was depleted of its stock of rusty hooks and stray corks were fastened on the brown linen lines for floats. Burt disdained to take his scientific tackle, and indeed there was little use for it in Moodna Creek, but he joined readily in the frolic. He would be willing to fish indefinitely for even minnows, if at the same time there was a chance to angle for Amy. Some preferred to walk to the river, and with the aid of the family rockaway the entire party were at the boat-house before the sun had passed much beyond the meridian. Burt, from his intimate knowledge of the channel, acted as pilot, and was jubilant over the fact that Amy consented to take an oar with him and receive a lesson in rowing. Mrs. Marvin held the tiller-ropes, and the doctor was to use a pair of oars when requested to do so. Webb and Leonard took charge of the larger boat, of which Johnnie, as hostess, was captain, and a jolly group of little boys and girls made the echoes ring, while Ned, with his thumb in his mouth, clung close to his mother, and regarded the nautical expedition rather dubiously. They swept across the flats to the deeper water near Plum Point, and so up the Moodna, whose shores were becoming green with the rank growth of the bordering marsh. Passing under an old covered bridge they were soon skirting an island from which rose a noble grove of trees, whose swollen buds were only waiting for a warmer caress of the sun to unfold. Returning, they beached their boats below the bridge, under whose shadow the fish were fond of lying. The little people were disembarked, and placed at safe distances; for, if near, they would surely hook each other, if never a fin. Silence was enjoined, and there was a breathless hush for the space of two minutes; then began whispers more resonant than those of the stage, followed by acclamations as Johnnie pulled up a wriggling eel, of which she was in mortal terror. They all had good sport, however, for the smaller fry of the finny tribes that haunted the vicinity of the old bridge suffered from the well-known tendency of extreme youth to take everything into its mouth. Indeed, at that season, an immature sun-fish will take a hook if there is but a remnant of a worm upon it. The day was good for fishing, since thin clouds darkened the water. Amy was the heroine of the party, for Burt had furnished her with a long, light pole, and taught her to throw her line well away from the others. As a result she soon took, amidst excited plaudits, several fine yellow perch. At last Leonard shouted:

"You shall not have all the honors, Amy. I have a hook in my pocket that will catch bigger fish than you have seen to-day. Come, the tide is going out, and we must go out of the creek with it unless we wish to spend the night on a sand-bar. I shall now try my luck at shad-fishing over by Polopel's Island."

The prospect of crossing the river and following the drift-nets down into the Highlands was a glad surprise to all, and they were soon in Newburgh Bay, whose broad lake-like surface was unruffled by a breath. The sun, declining towards the west, scattered rose-hues among the clouds. Sloops and schooners had lost steerage-way, and their sails flapped idly against the masts. The grind of oars between the thole-pins came distinctly across the water from far-distant boats, while songs and calls of birds, faint and etherealized, reached them from the shores. Rowing towards a man rapidly paying out a net from the stern of his boat they were soon hailed by Mr. Marks, who with genial good-nature invited them to see the sport. He had begun throwing his net over in the middle of the river, his oarsman rowing eastward with a slight inclination towards the south, for the reason that the tide is swifter on the western side. The aim is to keep the net as straight as possible and at right angles with the tide. The two boats were soon following Mr. Marks on either side, the smooth water and the absence of wind enabling them to keep near and converse without effort. Away in their wake bobbed the cork floats in an irregular line, and from these floats, about twenty feet below the surface, was suspended the net, which extended down thirty or forty feet farther, being kept in a vertical position by iron rings strung along its lower edge at regular intervals. Thus the lower side of the net was from fifty to sixty feet below the surface. In shallow water narrower nets are rigged to float vertically much nearer the surface. Mr. Marks explained that his net was about half a mile long, adding,

"It's fun fishing on a day like this, but it's rather tough in a gale of wind, with your eyes half blinded by rain, and the waves breaking into your boat. Yes, we catch just as many then, perhaps more, for there are fewer men out, and I suppose the weather is always about the same, except as to temperature, down where the shad are. The fish don't mind wet weather; neither must we if we make a business of catching them."

"Do you always throw out your net from the west shore towards the east?" Webb asked.

"No, we usually pay out against the wind. With the wind the boat is apt to go too fast. The great point is to keep the net straight and not all tangled and wobbled up. Passing boats bother us, too. Sometimes a float will catch on a paddle-wheel, and like enough half of the net will be torn away. A pilot with any human feeling will usually steer one side, and give a fellow a chance, and we can often bribe the skipper of sailing-craft by holding up a shad and throwing it aboard as he tacks around us. As a rule, however, boats of all kinds pass over a net without doing any harm. Occasionally a net breaks from the floats and drags on the bottom. This is covered with cinders thrown out by steamers, and they play the mischief."

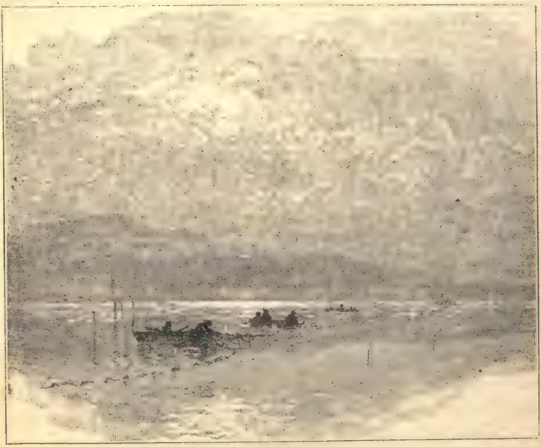
"Do the fish swim against the tide?"

"Usually, but they come in on both sides."

"Mr. Marks, how can you catch fish in a net that is straight up and down?" Amy asked.

"You'll soon see, but I'll explain. The meshes of the net will stretch five inches. A shad swims into one of these and then, like many others that go into things, finds he can't back out, for his gills catch on the sides of the mesh and there he hangs. Occasionally a shad will just tangle himself up and so be caught, and sometimes we take a large striped bass in this way."

In answer to a question of Burt's he continued: "I just let my net float with the tide as you see, giving it a pull from one end or the other now and then to keep it as straight and as near at right angles with the river as possible. When the tide stops running out and turns a little we begin at one end of the net and pull it up, taking out the fish, at the same time laying it carefully in folds on a platform in the stern-sheets, so as to prevent all tangles. If the net comes up clear and free, I may throw it in again and float back with the tide. So far from being able to depend on this, we often have to go ashore where there is a smooth beach before our drift is over and disentangle our net. There, now, I'm through with paying out. Haven't you noticed the floats bobbing here and there?"



SHAD-FISHING ON THE HUDSON.

"We've been too busy listening and watching you," said Leonard.

"Well, now, watch the floats. If you see one bob under and wobble, a shad has struck the net near it, and I can go and take him out. In smooth water it's like fishing with one of your little cork bobbers there on your lines. I'll give the shad to the first one that sees a float bob under."

Alf nearly sprang out of the boat as he pointed and shouted, "There, there."

Laughing good-naturedly, Mr. Marks lifted the net beneath the float, and, sure enough, there was a great roe-shad hanging by his gills, and Alf gloated over his supper, already secured.

The fish were running well, and there were excited calls and frantic pointings, in which at first even the older members of the party joined, and every few moments a writhing shad flashed in the slanting rays as it was tossed into the boat. Up and down the long, irregular line of floats the boats passed and repassed until excitement verged towards satiety, and the sun, near the horizon, with a cloud canopy of crimson and gold, warned the merry fishers by proxy that their boats should be turned homeward. Leonard pulled out what he termed his silver hook, and supplied not only the Clifford family, but all of Johnnie's guests, with fish so fresh that they had as yet scarcely realized that they were out of water.

"Now, Amy," said Burt, "keep stroke with me," adding, in a whisper, "no fear but that we can pull well together."

Her response was, "One always associates a song with rowing. Come, strike up, and let us keep the boats abreast that all may join."

He, well content, started a familiar boating song, to which the splash of their oars made musical accompaniment. A passing steamer saluted them, and a moment later the boats rose gracefully over the swells. The glassy river flashed back the crimson of the clouds, the eastern slopes of the mountains donned their royal purple, the intervening shadows of valleys making the folds of their robes. As they approached the shore the resonant song of the robins blended with the human voices. Burt, however, heard only Amy's girlish soprano, and saw but the pearl of her teeth through her parted lips, the rose in her cheeks, and the snow of her neck.

Final words were spoken and all were soon at home. Maggie took the household helm with a fresh and vigorous grasp.

What a supper she improvised! The maids never dawdled when she directed, and by the time the hungry fishermen were ready, the shad that two hours before had been swimming deep in the Hudson lay browned to a turn on the ample platter. "It is this quick transition that gives to game fish their most exquisite flavor," Burt remarked.

"Are shad put down among the game fish?" his father asked.

"Yes; they were included not very long ago, and most justly, too, as I can testify to-night. I never tasted anything more delicious, except trout. If a shad were not so bony it would be almost perfection when eaten under the right conditions. Not many on the Hudson are aware of the fact, perhaps, but angling for them is fine sport in some rivers. They will take a fly in the Connecticut and Housatonic; but angle-worms and other bait are employed in the Delaware and Southern rivers. The best time to catch them is early in the morning, and from six to eight in the evening. At dusk one may cast for them in still water, as for trout. The Hudson is too big, I suppose, and the water too deep, although I see no reason why the young fry should not be caught in our river as well as in the Delaware. I have read of their biting voraciously in September at a short distance above Philadelphia."

"Do you mean to say that our rivers are full of shad in August and September?" Leonard asked.

"Yes; that is, of young shad on the way to the sea. The females that are running up now will spawn in the upper and shallow waters of the river, and return to the ocean by the end of June, and in the autumn the small fry will also go to the sea, the females to remain there two years. The males will come back next spring, and these young males are called 'chicken shad' on the Connecticut. Multitudes of these half-grown fish are taken in seines, and sold as herrings or 'alewives;' for the true herring does not run up into fresh water. Young shad are said to have teeth, and they live largely on insects, while the full-grown fish have no teeth, and feed chiefly on animalcules that form the greater part of the slimy growths that cover nearly everything that is long under water."

"Well, I never had so much shad before in my life," said his father, laughing, and pushing back his chair; "and, Burt, I have enjoyed those you have served up in the water almost as much as those dished under Maggie's superintendence."

"I should suppose that the present mode of fishing with drift-nets was cheaper and more profitable than the old method of suspending the nets between poles," Leonard remarked.

"It is indeed," Burt continued, vivaciously, for he observed that Amy was listening with interest. "Poles, too, form a serious obstruction. Once, years ago, I was standing near the guards of a steamboat, when I heard the most awful grating, rasping sound, and a moment later a shad-pole gyrated past me with force enough to brain an elephant had it struck him. It was good fun, though, in old times to go out and see them raise the nets, for they often came up heavy with fish. Strange to say, a loon was once pulled up with the shad. Driven by fear, it must have dived so vigorously as to entangle itself, for there it hung with its head and one leg fast. I suppose that the last moment of consciousness that the poor bird had was one of strong surprise."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MAY AND GIRLHOOD.

MAY came in reality the following morning. Perhaps she thought that the leisure of Sunday would secure her a more appreciative welcome. The wind no longer blew from the chill and still snowy North, but from lands that had long since responded to the sun's genial power. Therefore, the breeze that came and went fitfully was like a warm, fragrant breath, and truly it seemed to breathe life and beauty into all things. During the morning hours the cluster buds of the cherry burst their varnished-looking sheath, revealing one third of the little green stems on which the blossoms would soon appear. The currant-bushes were hanging out their lengthening racemes, and the hum of many bees proved that honey may be gathered even from gooseberry-bushes, thus suggesting a genial philosophy. The sugar-maples were beginning to unfold their leaves and to dangle their emerald gold flowers from long, drooping pedicles. Few objects have more exquisite and delicate beauty than this inflorescence when lighted up by the low afternoon sun. The meadows and oat fields were passing into a vivid green, and the hardy rye had pushed on so resolutely in all weathers, that it was becoming billowy under the wind. All through the week the hues of life and beauty became more and more apparent upon the face of Nature, and by the following Saturday May had provided everything in perfection for Johnnie's coronation ceremonies.

For weeks past there had been distinguished arrivals from the South almost daily. Some of these songsters, like the fox-sparrow, sojourned a few weeks, favoring all listeners with their sweet and simple melodies; but the chief musician of the American forests, the hermit thrush, passed silently, and would not deign to utter a note of his unrivalled minstrelsy until he had reached his remote haunts at the North. Dr. Marvin evidently had a grudge against this shy, distant bird, and often complained, "Why can't he give us a song or two as he lingers here in his journey? I often see him flitting about in the mountains, and have watched him by the hour with the curiosity that prompts one to look at a great soprano or tenor, hoping that he might indulge me with a brief song as a sample of what he could do, but he was always royally indifferent and reserved. I am going to the Adirondacks on purpose to hear him some day. There's the winter wren, too — saucy, inquisitive little imp! — he was here all winter, and has left us without vouchsafing a note. But, then, great singers are a law unto themselves the world over."

But the doctor had small cause for complaint, for there are few regions more richly endowed with birds than the valley of the Hudson. As has been seen, it is the winter resort of not a few, and is, moreover, a great highway of migration, for birds are ever prone to follow the watercourses that run north and south. The region also affords so wide a choice of locality and condition that the tastes of very many birds are suited. There are numerous gardens and a profusion of fruit for those that are half domesticated; orchards abounding in old trees with knot-holes, admirably fitted for summer homes; elms on which to hang the graceful pensile nests — "castles in air," as Burroughs calls them; meadows in which the lark, vesper sparrow, and bobolink can disport; and forests stretching up into the mountains, wherein the shyest birds can enjoy all the seclusion they desire, content to sing unheard, as the flowers around them bloom unseen, except by those who love them well enough to seek them in their remotest haunts.

The week which preceded the May party was a memorable one to Amy, for during its sunny days she saw an American spring in its perfection. Each morning brought rich surprises to her, Johnnie, and Alf, and to Webb an increasing wonder that he had never before truly seen the world in which he lived. The pent-up forces of Nature, long restrained, seemed finding new expression every hour. Tulips opened their gaudy chalices to catch the morning dew. Massive spikes of hyacinths distilled a rich perfume that was none too sweet in the open air. Whenever Amy stepped from the door it seemed that some new flower had opened and some new development of greenery and beauty had been revealed. But the crowning glory in the near landscape were the fruit trees. The cherry boughs grew white every day, and were closely followed by the plum and pear and the pink-hued peach blossoms. Even Squire Bartley's unattractive place was transformed for a time into fairy-land; but he, poor man, saw not the blossoms, and the birds and boys stole his fruit. Amy wondered at the wealth of flowers that made many of the trees as white as they had been on the snowiest day of winter, and Johnnie revelled in them, often climbing up into some low-branched tree, that she might bury herself in their beauty, and inhale their fragrance in long breaths of delight. The bees that filled the air about her with their busy hum never molested her, believing, no doubt, that she had as good a right as themselves to enjoy the sweets in her way. After all, it was Mrs. Clifford, perhaps, who obtained the profoundest enjoyment from the season. Seated by her window or in a sunny corner of the piazza, she would watch the unfolding buds as if she were listening to some sweet old story that had grown dearer with every repetition. Indeed, this was true, for with the blossoms of every year were interwoven the memories of a long life, and their associations had scarcely ever been more to her heart than the new ones now forming. She often saw, with her children and grandchildren, the form of a tall girl passing to and fro, and to her loving eyes Amy seemed to be the fairest and sweetest flower of this gala period. She, and indeed they all, had observed Burt's strongly manifested preference, but, with innate refinement and good sense, there had been a tacit agreement to appear blind. The orphan girl should not be annoyed by even the most delicate raillery, but the old lady and her husband could not but feel the deepest satisfaction that Burt was making so wise a choice. They liked Amy all the better because she was so little disposed to sentiment, and proved that she was not to be won easily.

But they all failed to understand her, and gave her credit for a maturity that she did not possess. In her happy, healthful country life the girlish form that had seemed so fragile when she first came to them was taking on the rounded lines of womanhood. Why should she not be wooed like other girls at her age? Burt was farther astray than any one else, and was even inclined to complain mentally that her nature was cold and unresponsive. And yet her very reserve and elusiveness increased his passion, which daily acquired a stronger mastery. Webb alone half guessed the truth in regard to her. As time passed, and he saw the increasing evidences of Burt's feeling, he was careful that his manner should be strictly fraternal towards Amy, for his impetuous brother was not always disposed to be reasonable even in his normal condition, and now he was afflicted with a malady that has often brought to shame the wisdom of the wisest. The elder brother saw how easily Burt's jealousy could be aroused, and therefore denied himself many an hour of the young girl's society, although it caused him a strange little heartache to do so. But he was very observant, for Amy was becoming a deeply interesting study. He saw and appreciated her delicate fence with Burt, in which tact, kindness, and a little girlish brusqueness were almost equally blended. Was it the natural coyness of a high-spirited girl, who could be won only by long and patient effort? or was it an instinctive self-defence from a suit that she could not repulse decisively without giving pain to those she loved? Why was she so averse?

Their home-life, even at that busy season, gave him opportunities to see her often, and glimmerings of the truth began to dawn upon him. He saw that she enjoyed the society of Alf and Johnnie almost as much as that of the other members of the family, that her delight at every new manifestation of spring was as unforced as that of the children, while at the same time it was an intelligent and questioning interest. The beauty of the world without impressed her deeply, as it did Johnnie, but to the latter it was a matter of course, while to Amy it was becoming an inviting mystery. The little girl would bring some new flower from the woods or garden, the first of the season, in contented triumph, but to Amy the flower had a stronger interest. It represented something unknown, a phase of life which it was the impulse of her developing mind to explore. Her botany was not altogether satisfactory, for analysis and classification do not reveal to us a flower or plant any more than the mention of a name and family connection makes known individual character. Her love for natural objects was too real to be satisfied with a few scientific facts about them. If a plant, tree, or bird interested her she would look at it with a loving, lingering glance until she felt that she was learning to know it somewhat as she would recognize a friend. The rapid changes which each day brought were like new chapters in a story, or new verses in a poem. She watched with admiring wonder the transition of buds into blossoms; and their changes of form and color. She shared in Alf's excitement over the arrival of every new bird from the South, and, having a good ear for music, found absorbing pleasure in learning and estimating the quality and characteristics of their various songs. Their little oddities appealed to her sense of humor. A pair of cat-birds that had begun their nest near the house received from her more ridicule than admiration. "They seem to be regular society birds and gossips," she said, "and I can never step out-of-doors but I feel that they are watching me, and trying to attract my attention. They have a pretty song, but they seem to have learned it by heart, and as soon as they are through they make that horrid noise, as if in their own natural tone they were saying something disagreeable about you."

But on the morning of Johnnie's coronation she was wakened by songs as entrancing as they were unfamiliar. Running to the window, she saw darting through the trees birds of such a brilliant flame color that they seemed direct from the tropics, and their notes were almost as varied as their colors. She speedily ceased to heed them, however, for from the edge of the nearest grove came a melody so ethereal and sustained that it thrilled her with the delight that one experiences when some great singer lifts up her voice with a power and sweetness that we feel to be divine. At the same moment she saw Alf running towards the house. Seeing her at the window, he shouted, "Amy, the orioles and the wood-thrushes — the finest birds of the year — have come. Hurry up and go with me to the grove yonder."

Soon after Webb, returning from a distant field to breakfast, met her near the grove. She was almost as breathless and excited as the boy, and passed him with a bright hurried smile, while she pressed on after her guide with noiseless steps lest the shy songster should be frightened. He looked after her and listened, feeling that eye and ear could ask for no fuller enchantment. At last she came back to him with the fresh loveliness of the morning in her face, and exclaimed, "I have seen an ideal bird, and he wears his plumage like a quiet-toned elegant costume that simply suggests a perfect form. He was superbly indifferent, and scarcely looked at us until we came too near, and then, with a reserved dignity, flew away. He is the true poet of the woods, and would sing just as sweetly if there was never a listener."

"I knew he would not disappoint you. Yes, he is a poet, and your true aristocrat, who commands admiration without seeking it," Webb replied.

"I am sure he justifies all your praises, past and present.

Oh, isn't the morning lovely — so fresh, dewy, and fragrant? and the world looks so young and glad!"

"You also look young and glad this morning, Amy."

"How can one help it? This May beauty makes me feel as young as Alf," she replied, placing her hand on the boy's shoulder.

Her face was flushed with exercise; her step buoyant; her eyes were roaming over the landscape tinted with fruit blossoms and the expanding foliage. Webb saw in what deep accord her spirit was with the season, and he thought, "She *is* young — in the very May of her life. She is scarcely more ready for the words that Burt would speak than little Johnnie. I wish he would wait till the girl becomes a woman;" and then for some reason he sighed deeply. Amy gave him an arch look, and said,

"That came from the depths, Webb. What secret sorrow can you have on a day like this?"

He laughed, but made no reply.

"Ah, listen!" she cried, "what bird is that? Oh, isn't it beautiful? — almost equal to the thrush's song. He seems to sing as if his notes were written for him in couplets." She spoke at intervals, looking towards the grove they had just left, and when the bird paused Webb replied,

"That is the wood-thrush's own cousin, and a distinguished member of the thrush family, the brown-thrasher. Well, Johnnie," he added, to the little girl who had come to meet them, "you are honored to-day. Three of our most noted minstrels have arrived just in time to furnish music for the May Queen."

But Johnnie was not surprised, only pleased, as Webb and others congratulated her. She would be queen that day with scarcely more self-consciousness than one of the flowers that decked her. It was the occasion, the carnival of spring, that occupied her thoughts, and, since the fairest blossoms of the season were to be gathered, why should not the finest birds be present also?

Feeling that he had lost an opportunity in the improvised festival of the maple-sugar grove, Burt resolved to make the most of this occasion, and he had the wisdom to decide upon a course that relieved Amy of not a little foreboding. He determined to show his devotion by thoughtful considerateness, by making the day so charming and satisfactory as to prove that he could be a companion after her own heart. And he succeeded fairly well for a time, only the girl's intuition divined his motive and guessed his sentiments. She was ever in fear that his restraint would give way. And yet she felt that she ought to reward him for what she mentally termed his "sensible behavior," and indicate that such should be his course in the future. But this was a delicate and difficult task. In spite of all the accumulated beauty of the season the day was less bright, less full of the restful, happy *abandon* of the previous one in March, when Webb had been her undemonstrative attendant. He, with Leonard, at that busy period found time to look in upon the revellers in the woods but once. Mr. Clifford spent more time with them, but the old gentleman was governed by his habit of promptness, and the time called for despatch.

For the children, however, it was a revel that left nothing to be desired. They had decided that it should be a congress of flowers, from the earliest that had bloomed to those now opening in the sunniest haunts. Alf, with one or two other adventurous boys, had climbed the northern face of old Storm King, and brought away the last hepaticas, fragrant clusters of arbutus, and dicentras, for "pattykers, arbuties, and Dutcher's breeches," as Ned called them, were favorites that could not be spared. On a sunny slope dogwood, well advanced, was found. There were banks white with the rue-anemone, and they were marked, that some of the little tuber-like roots might be taken up in the fall for forcing in the house. Myriads of violets gave a purple tinge to parts of a low meadow near, and chubby hands were stained with the last of the star-like bloodroot blossoms, many of which dropped white petals on their way to Johnnie's throne.

Some brought handfuls of columbine from rocky nooks, and others the purple trillium, that is near of kin to Burroughs's white "wake-robin." There were so many Jacks-in-the-pulpit that one might fear a controversy, but the innumerable dandelions and dogtooth violets which carpeted the ground around the throne diffused so mellow a light that all the blossoms felt that they looked well and were amiable. But it would require pages even to mention all the flowers that were brought from gardens, orchards, meadows, groves, and rugged mountain slopes. Each delegation of blossoms and young tinted foliage was received by Amy, as mistress of ceremonies, and arranged in harmonious positions; while Johnnie, quite forgetful of her royalty, was as ready to help at anything as the humblest maid of honor. All the flowers were treated tenderly except the poor purple violets, and these were slaughtered by hundreds, for the projecting spur under the curved stem at the base of the flower enabled the boys to hook them together, and "fight roosters," as they termed it. Now and then some tough-stemmed violet would "hook off" a dozen blue heads before losing its own, and it became the temporary hero. At last the little queen asserted her power by saying, with a sudden flash in her dark blue eyes, that she "wouldn't have any more fighting roosters. She didn't think it was nice."

"By one o'clock the queen had been crowned, the lunch had met the capacity of even the boys, and the children, circling round the throne, were singing: "Oats, peas, beans, and barley grows," and kindred rhymes, their voices rising and falling with the breeze, the birds warbling an accompaniment. Webb and Leonard, at work in a field not far away, often paused to listen, the former never failing to catch Amy's clear notes as she sat on a rock, the gentle power behind the throne, that had maintained peace and good-will among all the little fractious subjects.

The day had grown almost sultry, and early in the afternoon there was a distant jar of thunder. Burt, who from a bed of dry leaves had been watching Amy, started up and saw that there was an ominous cloud in the west. She agreed with him that it would be prudent to return at once, for she was growing weary and depressed. Burt, with all his effort to be quietly and unobtrusively devoted, had never permitted her to become unconscious of his presence and feeling. Therefore her experience had been a divided one. She could not abandon herself to her hearty sympathy with the children and their pleasure, for he, by manner at least, ever insisted that she was a young lady, and the object of thoughts all too warm. Her nature was so fine that it was wounded and annoyed by an unwelcome admiration. She did not wish to think about it, but was not permitted to forget it. She had been genial, merry, yet guarded towards him all day, and now had begun to long for the rest and refuge of her own room. He felt that he had not made progress, and was also depressed, and he showed this so plainly on their way home that she was still more perplexed and troubled. "If he would only be sensible, and treat me as Webb does!" she exclaimed, as she threw herself on the lounge in her room, exhausted rather than exhilarated by the experience of the day.

CHAPTER XXIX.

NATURE'S WORKSHOP.

DURING the hour she slept an ideal shower crossed the sky. In the lower strata of air there was scarcely any wind, and the rain came down vertically, copiously, and without beating violence. The sun-warmed earth took in every drop like a great sponge. Beyond the first muttered warning to the little May party in the grove there was no thunder. The patter of the rain was a gentle lullaby to Amy, and at last she was wakened by a ray of sunlight playing upon her face, yet she still heard the soft fall of rain. With the elasticity of youth, she sprang up, feeling that the other cloud that had shadowed her thoughts might soon pass also. As she went singing down the stairway, Webb called from the front door:

"Amy, look here! I was hoping you would come. See that rainbow." The cloud still hung heavily over the eastern mountains, while against it was a magnificent arch, and so distinctly defined that its feet appeared to rest on the two banks of the river. They watched it in silence until it faded away, and the whole scene, crowned with flowers and opening foliage tinted like blossoms of varied hues, was gemmed with crystals by the now unclouded sun, for the soft rain had clung to everything, from the loftiest tree-top to the tiniest spire of grass. Flame-like orioles were flashing through the perfumed air. Robins, with their heads lifted heavenward, were singing as rapturously as if they were saints rather than rollicking gormandizers. Every bird that had a voice was lifting it up in thanksgiving, but clear, sweet, and distinct above them all came the notes of the wood-thrush, with his Beethoven-like melody.

"Have you no words for a scene like this, Webb?" she asked, at last.

"It is beyond all words, Amy. It is one of nature's miracles. My wonder exceeds even my admiration, for the greater part of this infinite variety of beauty is created out of so few materials and by so simple yet mysterious a method that I can scarcely believe it, although I see it and know it. Men have always agreed to worship the genius which could achieve the most with the least. And yet the basis of nearly all we see is a microscopic cell endowed with essential powers. That large apple-tree yonder, whose buds are becoming so pink, started from one of these minute cells, and all the growth, beauty, and fruitfulness since attained were the result of the power of this one cell to add to itself myriads of like cells, which form the whole structure. It is cell adding cells that is transforming the world around us." He spoke earnestly, and almost as if he were thinking aloud, and he looked like one in the presence of a mystery that awed him. The hue of Amy's eyes deepened, and her face flushed in her quickened interest. Her own mind had been turning to kindred thoughts and questionings. She had passed beyond the period when a mind like hers could be satisfied with the mere surface of things, and Webb's direct approach to the very foundation principles of what she saw sent a thrill through all her nerves as an heroic deed would have done.

"Can you not show me one of those cells with your microscope?" she asked, eagerly.

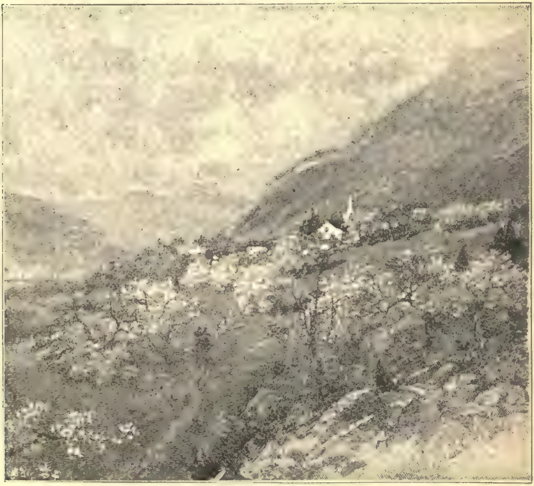
"Yes, easily, and some of its contents through the cell's transparent walls, as, for instance, the minute grains of *chlorophyll*, that is, the green of leaves. All the hues of foliage and flowers are caused by what the cells contain, and these, to a certain extent, can be seen and analyzed. But there is one thing within the cell which I cannot show you, and which has never been seen, and yet it accounts for everything, and is the architect of all —life. When we reach the cell we are at the threshold of this mysterious presence. We know that it is within. We can see its work, for its workshop is under our eye, and in this minute shop it is building all the vegetation of the world, but the artisan itself ever remains invisible."

"Ah, Webb, do not say artisan, but rather artist. Does not the beauty all around us prove it? Surely there is but one explanation, the one papa taught me: it is the power of God. He is in the little as well as in the great. Do you not believe so, Webb?"

"Well, Amy," he replied, smilingly, "the faith taught you by your father is, to my mind, more rational than any of the explanations that I have read, and I have studied several. But then I know little, indeed, compared with multitudes of others. I am sure, however, that the life of God is in some way the source of all the life we see. But perplexing questions arise on every side. Much of life is so repulsive and noxious — But there! what a fog-bank I am leading you into this crystal May evening! Most young girls would vote me an insufferable bore should I talk to them in this style."

"So much the worse for the young girls then. I should think they would feel that no compliment could exceed that of being talked to as if they had brains. But I do not wish to put on learned airs. You know how ignorant I am of even the beginnings of this knowledge. All that I can say is that I am not content to be ignorant. The curiosity of Mother Eve is growing stronger every day; and is it strange that it should turn towards the objects, so beautiful and yet so mysterious, that meet my eyes on every side?"

"No," said he, musingly, "the strange thing is that people have so little curiosity in regard to their surroundings. Why, multitudes of intelligent persons are almost as indifferent as the cattle that browse around among the trees and flowers. But I am a sorry one to preach. I once used to investigate things, but did not see them. I have thought about it very much this spring. It is said that great painters and sculptors study anatomy as well as outward form. Perhaps here is a good hint for those who are trying to appreciate nature. I am not so shallow as to imagine that I can ever understand nature any more than I can you with your direct, honest gaze. So to the thoughtful mystery is ever close at hand, but it seems no little thing to trace back what one sees as far as one can, and you have made me feel that it is a great thing to see the Divine Artist's finished work."



BLOSSOM-TIME.

They were now joined by others, and the perfect beauty of the evening as it slowly faded into night attracted much attention from all the family. The new moon hung in the afterglow of the western sky, and as the dusk deepened the weird notes of the whip-poor-will were heard for the first time from the mountain-sides.

At the supper-table Leonard beamed on every one. "A rain like this, after a week of sunshine has warmed the earth," he exclaimed, "is worth millions to the country. We can plant our corn next week."

"Yes," added his father, "the old Indian sign, the unfolding of the oak leaves, indicates that it is now safe to plant. Next week will be a busy one. After long years of observation, I am satisfied that the true secret of success in farming is the doing of everything at just the right time. Crops put in too early or too late often partially fail; but if the right conditions are complied with from the beginning, they start with a vigor which is not lost until maturity."

Burt indulged in a gayety that was phenomenal even for him, but after supper he disappeared. Amy retired to her room early, but she sat a long time at her window and looked out into the warm, fragrant night. She had forgotten poor Burt, who was thinking of her, as in his unrest he rode mile after mile, holding his spirited horse down to a walk. She had almost forgotten Webb, but she thought deeply of his words, of the life that was working all around her so silently and yet so powerfully. Unseen it had created the beauty she had enjoyed that day. From the very contrast of ideas it made her think of death, of her father, who once had been so strong and full of life. The mystery of one seemed as great as that of the other, and a loneliness such as she had not felt before for months depressed her. "I wish I could talk to Webb again," she thought. "He says he does not understand me. Little wonder; I do not understand myself. It would seem that when one began to think nothing that appeared simple before is understood; but his words are strong and assured. He leads one to the boundaries of the known, and then says, quietly, we can go no farther; but he makes you feel that what is beyond is all right. Oh, I wish Burt was like him!"

CHAPTER XXX.

SPRING-TIME PASSION.

BUT little chance had Amy to talk with Webb for the next few days. He had seen the cloud on Burt's brow, and had observed that he was suspicious, unhappy, and irritable; that reason and good sense were not in the ascendant; and he understood his brother sufficiently well to believe that his attack must run its natural course, as like fevers had done before. From what he had seen he also thought that Amy could deal with Burt better than any one else, for although high-strung, he was also manly and generous when once he got his bearings. In his present mood he would bitterly resent interference from any one, but would be bound to obey Amy and to respect her wishes. Therefore he took especial pains to be most kindly, but also to appear busy and pre-occupied.

It must not be thought that Burt was offensive or even openly obtrusive in his attentions. He was far too well-bred for that. There was nothing for which even his mother could reprove him, or of which Amy herself could complain. It was the suit itself from which she shrank, or rather which she would put off indefinitely. But Burt was not disposed to put anything that he craved into the distance. Spring-tide impulses were in his veins, and his heart was so overcharged that it must find expression. His opportunity came unexpectedly. A long, exquisite day had merged into a moonlight evening. The apple-blossoms were in all their white-and-pink glory, and filled the summer-like air with a fragrance as delicate as that of the arbutus. The petals of the cherry were floating down like snow in every passing breeze, glimmering momentarily in the pale radiance. The night was growing so beautiful that Amy was tempted to stroll out in the grounds, and soon she yielded to a fancy to see the effect of moonlight through an apple-tree that towered like a mound of snow at some little distance from the house. She would not have been human had the witchery of the May evening been without its influence. If Burt could have understood her, this was his opportunity. If he had come with step and tone that accorded with the quiet evening, and simply said, "Amy, you know — you have seen that I love you; what hope can you give me?" she in her present mood would have answered him as gently and frankly as a child. She might have laughingly pointed him to the tree, and said: "See, it is in blossom now. It will be a long time before you pick the apples. You must wait. If you will be sensible, and treat me as you would Johnnie, were she older, I will ride and walk with you, and be as nice to you as I can."

But this Burt could not do and still remain Burt. He was like an overcharged cloud, and when he spoke at last his words seemed to the sensitive girl to have the vividness and abruptness of the lightning. It was her custom to make a special toilet for the evening, and when she had come down to supper with a rose in her hair, and dressed in some light clinging fabric, she had proved so attractive to the young fellow that he felt that the limit of his restraint was reached. He would appeal to her so earnestly, so passionately, as to kindle her cold nature. In his lack of appreciation of Amy he had come to deem this his true course, and she unconsciously enabled him to carry out the rash plan. He had seen her stroll away, and had followed her until she should be so far from the house that she must listen. As she emerged from under the apple-tree, through which as a white cloud she had been looking at the moon, he appeared so suddenly as to startle her, and without any gentle re-assurance he seized her hand, and poured out his feelings in a way that at first wounded and frightened her.

"Burt," she cried, "why do you speak to me so? Can't you see that I do not feel as you do? I've given you no reason to say such words to me."

"Have you no heart, Amy? Are you as cold and elusive as this moonlight? I have waited patiently, and now I must and will speak. Every man has a right to speak and a right to an answer."

"Well then," she replied, her spirit rising, "if you will insist on my being a woman instead of a young girl just coming from the shadow of a great sorrow, I also have my rights. I've tried to show you gently and with all the tact I possessed that I did not want to think about such things. I'm just at the beginning of my girlhood and I want to be a young girl as long as I can and not an engaged young woman. No matter who spoke the words you have said, they would pain me. Why couldn't you see this from my manner and save both yourself and me from this scene? I'll gladly be your loving sister, but you must not speak to me in this way again."

"You refuse me then," he said, throwing back his head haughtily.

"Refuse you? No. I simply tell you that I won't listen to such words from any one. Why can't you be sensible and understand me? I no more wish to talk about such things than do Alf and Johnnie."

"I do understand you," he exclaimed, passionately, "and better perhaps than you understand yourself. You are not a child. You are a woman, but you seem to lack a woman's heart, as far as I am concerned;" and with a gesture that was very tragic and despairing he strode away.

She was deeply troubled and incensed also, and she returned to the house with drooping head and fast-falling tears.

"Why, Amy, what is the matter?" Looking up, she saw Webb coming down the piazza steps. Yielding to her impulse, she sprang forward and took his arm, as she said:

"Webb, you have always acted towards me like a brother. Tell me true: am I cold? am I heartless? is it unnatural in me that I do not wish to hear such words as Burt would speak to-night? All I ask is that he will let me stay a happy young girl till I am ready for something else. This is no way for a flower to bloom" — she snatched the rose from her hair, and pushed open the red petals — "and yet Burt expects me to respond at once to feelings that I do not even understand. If it's best in the future — but surely I've a right to my freedom for a long time yet. Tell me, do you think I'm unnatural?"

"No, Amy," he answered, gently. "It is because you are so perfectly natural, so true to your girlhood, that you feel as you do. In that little parable of the rose you explain yourself fully. You have no cause for self-reproach, nor has Burt for complaint. Will you do what I ask?"

"Yes, Webb. You say you do not understand me, and yet always prove that you do. If Burt would only treat me as you do, I should be perfectly happy."

"Well, Burt's good-hearted, but sometimes he mislays his judgment," said Webb, laughing. "Come, cheer up. There is no occasion for any high tragedy on his part or for grieving on yours. You go and tell mother all about it, and just how you feel. She is the right one to manage this affair, and her influence over Burt is almost unbounded. Do this, and, take my word for it, all will soon be serene."

And so it proved. Amy felt that night what it is to have a mother's boundless love and sympathy, and she went to her rest comforted, soothed, and more assured as to the future than she had been for a long time. "How quiet and sensible Webb was about it all!" was her last smiling thought before she slept. His thought as he strolled away in the moonlight after she left him was, "It is just as I half believed. She has the mind of a woman, but the heart of a child. How apt was her use of that rose! It told all."

Burt did not stroll; he strode mile after mile, and the uncomfortable feeling that he had been very unwise, to say the least, and perhaps very unjust, was growing upon him. When at last he returned, his mother called to him through the open door. Sooner or later, Mrs. Clifford always obtained the confidence of her children, and they ever found that it was sacred. All that can be said, therefore, was, that he came from her presence penitent, ashamed, and hopeful. His mood may best be explained, perhaps, by a note written before he retired. "My dear sister Amy," it ran, "I wish to ask your pardon. I have been unjust and ungenerous. I was so blinded and engrossed by my own feelings that I did not understand you. I have proved myself unworthy of even a sister's love; but I will try to make amends. Do not judge me harshly because I was so headlong. There is no use in trying to disguise the truth. What I have said so unwisely and prematurely I cannot unsay, and I shall always be true to my words. But I will wait patiently as long as you please; and if you find, in future years, that you cannot feel as I do, I will not complain or blame you, however sad the truth may be to me. In the meantime, let there be no constraint between us. Let me become once more your trusted brother Burt." This note he pushed under her door, and then slept too soundly for the blighted youth he had a few hours before deemed himself.

He felt a little embarrassed at the prospect of meeting her the next morning, but she broke the ice at once by coming to him on the piazza and extending her hand in smiling frankness as she said: "You are neither unjust nor ungenerous, Burt, or you would not have written me such a note. I take you at your word. As you said the first evening I came, we shall have jolly times together."

The young fellow was immensely relieved and grateful, and he showed it. Soon afterwards he went about the affairs of the day happier than he had been for a long time. Indeed, it soon became evident that his explosion on the previous evening had cleared the air generally. Amy felt that the one threatening cloud had sunk below the horizon. As the days passed, and Burt proved that he could keep his promise, her thoughts grew as serene as those of Johnnie. Her household duties were not very many, and yet she did certain things regularly. The old people found that she rarely forgot them, and she had the grace to see when she could help and cheer. Attentions that must be constantly asked for have little charm. A day rarely passed that she did not give one or more of its best hours to her music and drawing; for, while she never expected to excel in these arts, she had already learned that they would enable her to give much pleasure to others. Her pencil, also, was of great assistance in her study of out-door life, for the fixed attention which it required to draw a plant, tree, or bit of scenery revealed its characteristics. She had been even more interested in the unfolding of the leaf-buds than in the flowering of the trees, and the gradual advance of the foliage, like a tinted cloud, up the mountain-slopes, was something she never tired of watching. When she spoke of this one day to Webb, he replied:

"I have often wondered that more is not said and written about our spring foliage, before it passes into its general hue of green. To me it has a more delicate beauty and charm than anything seen in October. Different trees have their distinct coloring now as then, but it is evanescent, and the shades usually are less clearly marked. This very fact, however, teaches the eye to have a nicety of distinction that is pleasing."

The busy days passed quickly on. The blossoms faded from the trees, and the miniature fruit was soon apparent. The strawberry rows, that had been like lines of snow, were now full of little promising cones. The grass grew so lusty and strong that the dandelions were hidden except as the breeze caught up the winged seeds that the tuneful yellow-birds often seized in the air. The rye had almost reached its height, and Johnnie said it was "as good as going to the ocean to see it wave." At last the swelling buds on the rose-bushes proclaimed the advent of June.

CHAPTER XXXI.

JUNE AND HONEY-BEES.

IT is said that there is no heaven anywhere for those incapable of recognizing and enjoying it. Be this as it may, the month of June is a segment of heaven annually bestowed on those whose eyes and ears have been opened to beauty in sight and sound. Indeed, what sense in man is not gratified to the point of imaginary perfection during this early fruition of the varied promise of spring? Even to the sense of touch, how exquisite is the "feel" of the fragrant rose-petals, the soft young foliage that has transformed the world, and the queer downy fledglings in innumerable nests! To the eye informed by a heart in love with nature the longest days of the year are all too short to note half that exists and takes place. Who sees and distinguishes the varied blossoming of the many kinds of grain and grasses that are waving in every field? And yet here is a beauty as distinct and delicate as can be found in some of Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words" — blossomings so odd, delicate, and evanescent as to suggest a child's dream of a flower. Place them under a strong glass, and who can fail to wonder at the miracles of form and color that are revealed? From these tiny flowerets the scale runs upward until it touches the hybrid rose. During this period, also, many of the forest trees emulate the wild flowers at their feet until their inflorescence culminates in the white cord-like fringe that foretells the spiny chestnut burrs.

So much has been written comparing this exquisite season when spring passes insensibly into summer with the fulfilled prophecy of girlhood, that no attempt shall be made to repeat the simile. Amy's birthday should have been in May, but it came early in June. May was still in her heart, and might linger there indefinitely; but her mind, her thoughts, kept pace with nature as unconsciously as the flowers that bloomed in their season. There were little remembrances from all the family, but Webb's gift promised the most pleasure. It was a powerful opera-glass; and as he handed it to her on the piazza in the early morning he said:

"Our troupe are all here now, Amy, and I thought that you would like to see the singers, and observe their costumes and expressions. Some birds have a good deal of expression and a very charming manner while singing — a manner much more to my taste than that of many a *prima donna* whom I have heard, although my taste may be uncultivated. Focus your glass on that indigo-bird in yonder tree-top. Don't you see him? — the one that is favoring us with such a lively strain, beginning with a repetition of short, sprightly notes. The glass may enable you to see his markings accurately."

"Oh, what an exquisite glossy blue! and it grows so deep and rich about the head, throat, and breast! How plain I can see him, even to the black velvet under his eyes! There is brown on his wings, too. Why, I can look right into his little throat, and almost imagine I see the notes he is flinging abroad so vivaciously. I can even make out his claws closed on a twig, and the dew on the leaves around him is like gems. Truly, Webb, you were inspired when you thought of this gift."

"Yes," he replied, quietly, looking much pleased, however, "with a very honest wish to add to your enjoyment of the summer. I must confess, too, that I had one thought at least for myself. You have described the indigo-bird far more accurately than I could have done, although I have seen it every summer as long as I can remember. You have taught me to see; why should I not help you to see more when I can do it so easily? My thought was that you would lend me the glass occasionally, so that I might try to keep pace with you. I've been using the microscope too much — prying into nature, as Burt would say, with the spirit of an anatomist."

"I shall value the glass a great deal more if you share it with me," she said, simply, with a sincere, direct gaze into his eyes; "and be assured, Webb," she added, earnestly, "you are helping me more than I can help you. I'm not an artist, and never can be, but if I were I should want something more than mere surface, however beautiful it might be. Think of it, Webb, I'm eighteen to-day, and I know so little! You always make me feel that there is so much to learn, and, what is more, that it is worth knowing. You should have been a teacher, for you would make the children feel, when learning their lessons, as Alf does when after game. How well nature bears close scrutiny!" she added, sweeping the scene with her glass. "I can go every day now on an exploring expedition. But there is the breakfast-bell."

Mr. Clifford came in a little late, rubbing his hands felicitously, as he said:

"I have just come from the apiary, and think we shall have another swarm to-day. Did you ever hear the old saying, Amy,

'A swarm of bees in June
Is worth a silver spoon'?

If one comes out to-day, and we hive it safely, we shall call it yours, and you shall have the honey."

"How much you are all doing to sweeten my life!" she said, laughing; "but I never expected the present of a swarm of bees. I assure you it is a gift that you will have to keep for me, and yet I should like to see how the bees swarm, and how you hive them. Would it be safe? I've heard that bees are so wise, and know when people are afraid of them."

"You can fix yourself up with a thick veil and a pair of gloves so that there will be no danger, and your swarm of bees, when once in the hive, will take care of themselves, and help take care of you. That's the beauty of bee-culture."

"Our bees are literally in clover this year," Leonard remarked. "That heavy coating of wood-ashes that I gave to a half-acre near the apiary proved most effective, and the plot now looks as if a flurry of snow had passed over it, the white clover blossoms are so thick. That is something I could never understand, Webb. Wood-ashes will always bring white clover. It's hard to believe that it all comes from seed dormant in the ground."

"Well, it does," was the reply.

"A great many think that the ashes simply produce conditions in the soil which generate the clover."

"Out of nothing? That would not be simple at all, and if any one could prove it he would make a sensation in the scientific world."

"Now, Len, here's your chance," laughed Burt. "Just imagine what a halo of glory you would get by setting the scientific world agape with wonder!"

"I could make the scientific world gape in a much easier way," Leonard replied, dryly. "Well, Amy, if you are as fond of honey as I am, you will think a swarm of bees a very nice present. Fancy buckwheat cakes eaten with honey made from buckwheat blossoms! There's a conjunction that gives to winter an unflagging charm. If the old Hebrews felt as I do, a land flowing with milk and honey must have been very alluring. Such a land the valley of the Hudson certainly is. It's one of the finest grass regions of the world, and grass means milk; and the extensive raspberry fields along its banks mean honey. White clover is all very well, but I've noticed that when the raspberry-bushes are in bloom they are alive with bees. I believe even the locust-trees would be deserted for these insignificant little blossoms that, like many plain people, are well worth close acquaintance."

"The linden-tree, which also blooms this month," added

Webb, "furnishes the richest harvest for the honey-bees, and I don't believe they would leave its blossoms for any others. I wish there were more lindens in this region, for they are as ornamental as they are useful. I've read that they are largely cultivated in Russia for the sake of the bees. The honey made from the linden or bass-wood blossoms is said to be crystal in its transparency, and unsurpassed in delicacy of flavor."

"Well," said Mr. Clifford, "I shall look after the apiary today. That's good lazy work for an old man. You can help me watch at a safe distance, Amy, and protected, as I said, if they swarm. It wouldn't be well for you to go too near the hives at first, you know," he added, in laughing gallantry, "for they might mistake you for a flower. They are so well acquainted with me that I raise neither expectations nor fears. You needn't come out before ten o'clock, for they don't swarm until towards midday."

With shy steps, and well protected, Amy approached the apiary; near which the old gentleman was sitting in placid fearlessness under the shade of a maple, the honey of whose spring blossoms was already in the hive. For a time she kept at a most respectful distance, but, as the bees did not notice her, she at last drew nearer, and removed her veil, and with the aid of her glass saw the indefatigable workers coming in and going out with such celerity that they seemed to be assuring each other that there were tons of honey now to be had for the gathering. The bees grew into large insects under her powerful lenses, and their forms and movements were very distinct. Suddenly from the entrance of one hive near Mr. Clifford, which she happened to be covering with her glass, she saw pouring out a perfect torrent of bees. She started back in affright, but Mr. Clifford told her to stand still, and she noted that he quietly kept his seat, while following through his gold-rimmed spectacles the swirling, swaying stream that rushed into the upper air. The combined hum smote the ear with its intensity. Each bee was describing circles with almost the swiftness of light, and there were such numbers that they formed a nebulous living mass. Involuntarily she crouched down in the grass. In a few moments, however, she saw the swarm draw together and cluster like a great black ball on a bough of a small pear-tree. The queen had alighted, and all her subjects gathered around her.

"Ah," chuckled the old gentleman, rising quietly, "they couldn't have been more sensible if they had been human — not half so sensible in that case, perhaps. I think you will have your swarm now without doubt. That's the beauty of these Italian bees when they are kept pure: they are so quiet and sensible. Come away now, until I return prepared to hive them."

The young girl obeyed with alacrity, and was almost trembling with excitement, to which fear as well as the novelty of the scene contributed not a little. Mr. Clifford soon returned, well protected and prepared for his work. Taking an empty hive, he placed it on the ground in a secluded spot, and laid before its entrances a broad, smooth board. Then he mounted a step-ladder, holding in his left hand a large tin pan, and gently brushed the bees into it as if they had been inanimate things. A sheet had first been spread beneath the pear-tree to catch those that did not fall into the pan. Touched thus gently and carefully, the immense vitality of the swarm remained dormant; but a rough, sudden movement would have transformed it instantly into a vengeful cloud of insects, each animated by the one impulse to use its stiletto. Coming down from the ladder, he turned the pan towards Amy, and with her glass she saw that it was nearly half full of a crawling, seething mass that fairly made her shudder. But much experience rendered the old gentleman confident, and he only smiled as he carried the pan of bees to the empty hive, and poured them out on the board before it. The sheet was next gathered up and placed near the hive also, and then the old gentleman backed slowly and quietly away until he had joined Amy, to whom he said, "My part of the work is now done, and I think we shall soon see them enter the hive." He was right, for within twenty minutes every bee had disappeared within the new domicile. "To-night I will place the hive on the platform with the others, and to-morrow your bees will be at work for you, Amy. I don't wonder you are so interested, for of all insects I think bees take the palm. It is possible that the swarm will not fancy their new quarters, and will come out again, but it is not probable. Screened by this bush, you can watch in perfect safety;" and he left her well content, with her glass fixed on the apiary.

Having satisfied herself for the time with observing the workers coming and going, she went around to the white clover-field to see the process of gathering the honey. She had long since learned that bees while at work are harmless, unless so cornered that they sting in self-defence. Sitting on a rock at the edge of the clover-field, she listened to the drowsy monotone of innumerable wings. Then she bent her glass on a clover head, and it grew at once into a collection of little white tubes or jars in which from earth, air, and dew nature distilled the nectar that the bees were gathering. The intent workers stood on their heads and emptied these fragrant honey-jars with marvellous quickness. They knew when they were loaded, and in straight lines as geometrically true as the hexagon cells in which the honey would be stored they darted to their hives. When the day grew warm she returned to the house and read, with a wonder and delight which no fairy tale had ever produced, John Burroughs's paper, "The Pastoral Bees," which Webb had found for her before going to his work. To her childish credulity fairy lore had been more interesting than wonderful, but the instincts and habits of these children of nature touched on mysteries that can never be solved.

At dinner the experiences of the apiary were discussed, and Leonard asked, "Do you think the old-fashioned custom of beating tin pans and blowing horns influences a swarm to alight? The custom is still maintained by some people in the vicinity."

"I doubt it," said Webb. "It is no longer practised by scientific bee-keepers, and yet it is founded on the principle that anything which disconcerts the bees may change their plans. It is said that water or dry earth thrown into a whirling swarm will sometimes cause it to alight or return to the hive."

"Your speaking of blowing horns," said Mr. Clifford, laughing, "recalls a hiving experience that occurred seventy years ago. I was a boy then, but was so punctured with stings on a June day like this that a vivid impression was made on my memory. We were expecting swarms every day. A neighbor, a quaint old man who lived very near, had gained the reputation of an expert at this business. I can see him now, with his high stove-pipe hat, and his gnarled, wrinkled visage, which he shrouded in a green veil when hiving a swarm. He was a good-hearted old fellow, but very rough in his talk. He had been to sea in early life, and profanity had become the characteristic of his vernacular. Well, word came one morning that the bees were swarming, and a minute later I aroused the old man, who was smoking and dozing on his porch. I don't believe you ever ran faster, Alf, than I did then. Hiving bees was the old fellow's hobby and pride, and he dived into his cottage, smashing his clay pipe on the way, with the haste of an attacked soldier seizing his weapons. In a moment he was out with all his paraphernalia. To me was given a fish-horn of portentous size and sound. The 'skips,' which were the old-fashioned straw hives that the bears so often emptied for our forefathers, stood in a large door-yard, over which the swarm was circling. As we arrived on the scene the women were coming from the house with tin pans, and nearly all the family were out-of-doors. It so happened that an old white horse was grazing in the yard, and at this critical moment was near the end of the bench on which stood the hives. Coming up behind him, I thoughtlessly let off a terrific blast from my horn, at which he, terrified, kicked viciously. Over went a straw skip, and in a moment we had another swarm of bees on hand that we had not bargained for. Dropping my horn, I covered my face with my arm, and ran for life to the house, but I must have been stung twenty times before I escaped. The bees seemed everywhere, and as mad as hornets. Although half wild with pain, I had to laugh as I saw the old man frantically trying to adjust his veil, meanwhile almost dancing in his anguish. In half a minute he succumbed, and tore into a wood-shed. Everybody went to cover instantly except the white horse, and he had nowhere to go, but galloped around the yard as if possessed. This only made matters worse, for innocent as he was, the bees justly regarded him as the cause of all the trouble. At last, in his uncontrollable agony, he floundered over a stone wall, and disappeared. For an hour or two it was almost as much as one's life was worth to venture out. The old man, shrouded and mittened, at last crept off homeward to nurse his wounds and his wrath, and he made the air fairly sulphurous around him with his oaths. But that kind of sulphuric treatment did not affect the bees, for I observed from a window that at one point nearest the skips he began to run, and he kept up a lively pace until within his door. What became of the swarm we expected to hive I do not know. Probably it went to the woods. That night we destroyed the irate swarm whose skip had been kicked over, and peace was restored."

"If you had told that story at the breakfast-table," said Amy, as soon as the laugh caused by the old gentleman's account had subsided, "you could never have induced me to be present this morning, even at such a respectful distance."

"An old man who lives not far from us has wonderful success with bees," Leonard remarked. "He has over fifty hives in a space not more than twenty feet square, and I do not think there is a tenth of an acre in his whole lot, which is in the centre of a village. To this bare little plot his bees bring honey from every side, so that for his purpose he practically owns this entire region. He potters around them so much that, as far as he is concerned, they are as docile as barn-door fowls, and he says he minds a sting no more than a mosquito bite. There are half a dozen small trees and bushes in his little yard, and his bees are so accommodating that they rarely swarm elsewhere than on these low trees within a few feet of the skips. He also places mullein stalks on a pole, and the swarms often cluster on them. He told me that on one day last summer he had ten swarms to look after, and that he hived them all; and he says that his wife is as good at the work as he is. On a pole which forms the corner of a little poultry-coop he keeps the record of the swarms of each season, and for last summer there are sixty-one notches. A year ago this month four swarms went into a barrel that stood in a corner of his yard, and he left them there. By fall they had filled the barrel with honey, and then, in his vernacular, he 'tuck it up;' that is, he killed the bees, and removed all the honey."

"That is the regular bee-phrase in this region. If a hive is to be emptied and the bees destroyed, or a bee tree to be cut down, the act is described as 'taking up' the hive or tree," Burt explained. "By the way, Amy," he added, "we must give you a little bee-hunting experience in the mountains next October. It would make a jolly excursion. We can leave you with a guard at some high point, when we strike a bee-line, and we might not be long in finding the tree."

"We'll put the expedition right down on the fall programme," she said, smilingly. Then turning to Mr. Clifford, she continued: "You spoke in praise of Italian bees. What kind are they? and how many kinds are there?"

"Really only two distinct kinds — our native brownish-black bees, and the Italians imported by Mr. S. B. Parsons and others about fifteen years ago. There is a cross or hybrid between these two kinds that are said to be so ill-natured that it is unsafe to go anywhere near their hives."

"Burt," said Webb, "you must remember reading in Virgil of the 'golden bees.'"

"Yes, indistinctly; but none of them ever got in my bonnet or made much impression. I don't like bees, nor do they like me. They respect only the deliberation of profound gravity and wisdom. Father has these qualities by the right of years, and Webb by nature, and their very presence soothes the irascible insects; but when I go among them they fairly bristle with stings. Give me a horse, and the more spirited the better."

"Oh no, Burt; can't give you any," said Leonard, with his humorous twinkle. "I'll sell you one, though, cheap."

"Yes, that vicious, uncouth brute that you bought because so cheap. I told you that you were 'sold' at the same time with the horse."

"I admit it," was the rueful reply. "If he ever balks again as he did to-day, I shall be tempted to shoot him."

"Oh dear!" said Amy, a little petulantly, "I'd rather hear about Italian bees than balky horses. Has my swarm of bees any connection with those that Virgil wrote about, Webb?"

"They may be direct descendants," he replied.

"Then call them May-bees," laughed Burt.

"The kind of bees that Virgil wrote about were undoubtedly their ancestors," resumed Webb, smiling at Burt's sally, "for bees seem to change but little, if any, in their traits and habits. Centuries of domestication do not make them domestic, and your swarm, if not hived, would have gone to the mountains and lived in a hollow tree. I have a book that will give you the history and characteristics of the Italians, if you would like to read about them."

"I certainly should. My mind is on bees now, and I intend to follow them up until I get stung probably. Well, I've enjoyed more honey this morning, although I've not tasted any, than in all my life. You see how useful I make the opera-glass, Webb. With it I can even gather honey that does not cloy."

CHAPTER XXXII.

BURT BECOMES RATIONAL.

BURT had expended more on his present for Amy than had any of the family, and, while it had been acknowledged most cordially, he was a little disappointed that his choice had not been so happy as Webb's. Therefore after dinner he said: "I feel almost envious. I wish I could give you a great deal of pleasure also to-day. How would you like to go in a row-boat to Constitution Island, and make that visit to Miss Warner of which we spoke last winter? It's warm, but not sultry, and we would keep in the shadow of the mountains most of the way down."

She hesitated a moment.

"Don't be afraid, Amy," he said, in a low tone.

"I'll go with you," she assented, cordially, "and I cannot think of anything that would make my birthday more complete."

"I'll be ready in an hour," he said, flushing with pleasure, and he went up to his room two steps at a time.

Burt's mental processes during the past few weeks had been characteristic, and would have amused Amy had she been fully aware of them. As Webb surmised, his fever had to run its course, but after its crisis had passed he rapidly grew rational. Moreover, in his mother, and indeed in Amy herself, he had the best of physicians. At first he was very penitent, and not a little chagrined at his course. As days went by, however, and it was not referred to by word or sign on the part of the family, his nervous apprehension passed away. He thought he detected a peculiar twinkle in Leonard's eyes occasionally, but it might have resulted from other causes. Still Amy did the most to re-assure him both consciously and unconsciously. As she said, she took him at his word, and being unembarrassed by any feeling of her own, found it easy to act like a sister towards him. This naturally put him at his ease. In her floral expeditions with Johnnie, however, and her bird-nestings with Alf, wherein no birds were robbed, she unconsciously did more to reconcile him to the necessity of waiting than could hours of argument from even his mother. She thus proved to him that he had spoken much too soon — that she was not ready for his ill-chosen, passionate words, which had wounded instead of firing her heart as he intended they should. He now berated his stupidity, but consoled himself with the thought that love is always a little blind. He saw that she liked Webb exceedingly, and enjoyed talking with him, but he now was no longer disposed to be jealous. She ever seemed to be asking questions like an intelligent child. "Why shouldn't she like Webb?" he thought. "He is one of the best fellows in the world, and she has found out that he's a walking encyclopædia of out-door lore."

Burt was not one to be depressed or to remain in the valley of humiliation very long. After a week or two a slight feeling of superiority began to assert itself. Amy was not only too young to understand him, but also, perhaps, to appreciate him. He believed that he knew more than one pretty girl to whom he would not have spoken in vain. Some day the scales would fall from Amy's eyes. He could well afford to wait until they did, and he threw back his handsome head at the thought, and an exultant flash came into his blue eyes. Oh, he would be faithful, he would be magnanimous, and he also admitted to himself that he would be very glad and grateful; but he would be very patient, perhaps a little too much so to suit her. Since he had been told to "wait," he would wait until her awakening heart constrained her to give unequivocal signs of readiness to surrender.

Thus his thoughts ran on while he was busy about the farm, or galloping over the country on business or pleasure. After the corn-planting and the rush of work in May was over, he had given himself a week's outing among the trout streams of Ulster County, and had returned with his equanimity quite restored. To assure Amy of this, and that she had nothing more to fear, but everything to gain, was one of his motives in asking her to take the long sail that afternoon. He succeeded so well that a smile of very genuine satisfaction hovered about her lips more than once. She enjoyed the expedition exceedingly. She was grateful for the kind reception given her by the authors who had done much to sweeten and purify the world's thought. She was charmed with the superb scenery as on their return they glided along in the shadows of Cro' Nest, whose sides seemed lined with a choir of wood and veery thrushes and other wild songsters. At last they evoked the spirit of music in her. She took an oar with Burt, and they pulled, sang, and laughed together like careless, happy children. Yet more than once she shyly glanced at him, and queried, Could his flushed and mirthful face be that of the passionate lover and blighted youth of scarce a month since? Burt said something droll, and her laugh raised a musical echo against the steep rocks near. His wit was not its cause, but her own thought: "My plea was that I was too young; he's very young, too."

As they neared the point of Storm King the evening boat, the *Mary Powell*, swept towards them with scarcely more apparent effort than that of a swan. A few moments later their skiff was dancing over the swells, Amy waving her handkerchief, and the good-natured pilot awakening a hundred echoes by his steam-whistle of responsive courtesy.

They were at home in time for supper, and here another delicious surprise awaited Amy. Johnnie and Alf felt that they should do something in honor of the day. From a sunny hillside they had gleaned a gill of wild strawberries, and

Webb had found that the heat of the day had so far developed half a dozen Jacqueminot rosebuds that they were ready for gathering. These with their fragrance and beauty were beside her plate in dainty arrangement. They seemed to give the complete and final touch to the day already replete with joy and kindness, and happy, grateful tears rushed into the young girl's eyes. Dashing them brusquely away, she said: "I can't tell you all what I feel, and I won't try. I want you to know, however," she added, smilingly, while her lips quivered, "that I am very much at home."

Burt was in exuberant spirits, for Amy had told him that she had enjoyed every moment of the afternoon. This had been most evident, and the young fellow congratulated himself. He could keep his word, he could be so jolly a companion as to leave nothing to be desired, and waiting, after all, would not be a martyrdom. His mood unloosed his tongue and made him eloquent as he described his experiences in trout-fishing. His words were so simple and vivid that he made his listeners hear the cool splash and see the foam of the mountain brooks. They saw the shimmer of the speckled beauties as they leaped for the fly, and felt the tingle of the rod as the line suddenly tightened, and heard the hum of the reel as the fish darted away in imagined safety. Burt saw his vantage — was not Amy listening with intent eyes and glowing cheeks? — and he kept the little group in suspense almost as long as it had taken him to play, land, and kill a three-pound trout, the chief trophy of his excursion.

Webb was unusually silent, and was conscious of a depression for which he could not account. All was turning out better than he had predicted. The relations between Burt and Amy were not only "serene," but were apparently becoming decidedly blissful. The young girl was enthusiastic over her enjoyment of the afternoon; there were no more delicately veiled defensive tactics against Burt, and now her face was full of frank admiration of his skill as an angler and of interest in the wild scenes described. Burt had spent more time in society than over his books while at college, and was a fluent, easy talker. Webb felt that he suffered in contrast, that he was grave, heavy, dull, and old — no fit companion for the girl whose laughing eyes so often rested on his brother's face and responded to his mirth. Perhaps Burt would not have long to wait; perhaps his rash, passionate words had already given to Amy's girlish unconsciousness the shock that had destroyed it, and she was learning that she was a woman who could return love for love. Well, granting this, was it not just what they were all expecting? "But the change is coming too soon," he complained to himself. "I wish she could keep her gentle, lovable, yet unapproachable May-day grace a little longer. Then she was like the wind-flower, which the eyes can linger upon, but which fades almost the moment it is grasped. It made her so different from other girls of her age. It identified her with the elusive spirit of nature, whose beauty entrances one, but search and wander where we will, nothing can be found that is distinctly and tangibly ours or any one's. Amy, belonging definitely to any one, would lose half her charm."

Webb saw and heard all that passed, but in a minor key thoughts like these were forming themselves, with little volition on his part, and were symptoms which as yet he did not understand. In an interval of mirth, Johnnie heard footsteps on the piazza, and darting out, caught a glimpse of Mr. Alvord's retreating form. He had come on some errand, and, seeing the group at the supper-table, had yielded to the impulse to depart unrecognized. This the little girl would by no means permit. Since Easter an odd friendship had sprung up between her and the lonely man, and she had become almost his sole visitor. She now called after him, and in a moment was at his side. "Why are you going away?" she said. "You must not go till I show you my garden."

Maggie joined them, for he deeply enlisted her sympathy, and she wished to make it clear by her manner that the tie between him and the child had her approval. "Yes, indeed, Mr. Alvord," she said, "you must let Johnnie show you her garden, and especially her pansies."

"Heart's-ease is another name for the flower, I believe," he replied, with the glimmer of a smile. "In that case Johnnie should be called Pansy. I thank you, Mrs. Clifford, that you are willing to trust your child to a stranger. We had a lovely ramble the other day, and she said that you told her she might go with me."

"I'm only too glad that you find Johnnie an agreeable little neighbor," Maggie began. "Indeed, we all feel so neighborly that we hope you will soon cease to think of yourself as a stranger." But here impatient Johnnie dragged him off to see her garden, and his close and appreciative attention to all she said and showed to him won the child's heart anew. Amy soon joined them, and said:

"Mr. Alvord, I wish your congratulations, also. I'm eighteen to-day."

He turned, and looked at her so wistfully for a moment that her eyes fell. "I do congratulate you," he said, in a low, deep voice. "If I had my choice between all the world and your age, I'd rather be eighteen again. May your brow always be as serene as it is to-night, Miss Amy." His eyes passed swiftly from the elder to the younger girl, the one almost as young at heart and fully as innocent as the other, and then he spoke abruptly: "Good-by, Johnnie. I wish to see your father a moment on some business;" and he walked rapidly away. By the time they reached the house he had gone. Amy felt that with the night a darker shadow had fallen upon her happy day. The deep sadness of a wounded spirit touched her own, she scarcely knew why. It was but the law of her unwarped, unselfish nature. Even as a happy girl she could not pass by uncaring, on the other side. She felt that she would like to talk with Webb, as she always did when anything troubled her; but he, touched with something of Burt's old restlessness, had rambled away in the moonlight, notwithstanding the fatigues of the day. Therefore she went to the piano and sang for the old people some of the quaint songs of which she knew they were fond. Burt sat smoking and listening on the piazza in immeasurable content.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WEBB'S ROSES AND ROMANCE.

TO Mrs. Clifford the month of June brought the halcyon days of the year. The warm sunshine revived her, the sub-acid of the strawberry seemed to furnish the very tonic she needed, and the beauty that abounded on every side, and that was daily brought to her couch, conferred a happiness that few could understand. Long years of weakness, in which only her mind could be active, had developed in the invalid a refinement scarcely possible to those who must daily meet the practical questions of life, and whose more robust natures could enjoy the material side of existence. It was not strange, therefore, that country life had matured her native love of flowers into almost a passion, which culminated in her intense enjoyment of the rose in all its varieties. The family, aware of this marked preference, rarely left her without these flowers at any season; but in June her eyes feasted on their varied forms and colors, and she distinguished between her favorites with all the zest and accuracy which a connoisseur of wines ever brought to bear upon their delicate bouquet. With eyes shut she could name from its perfume almost any rose with which she was familiar. Therefore, in all the flower-beds and borders roses abounded, especially the old-fashioned kinds, which are again finding a place in florists' catalogues. Originally led by love for his mother, Webb, years since, had begun to give attention to the queen of flowers. He soon found, however, that the words of an English writer are true, "He who would have beautiful roses in his garden must have them first in his heart," and there, with queenly power, they soon enthroned themselves. In one corner of the garden, which was protected on the north and west by a high stone wall, where the soil was warm, loamy, and well drained, he made a little rose garden. He bought treatises on the flower, and when he heard of or saw a variety that was particularly fine he added it to his collection. "Webb is marked with my love of roses," his mother often said, with her low, pleased laugh. Amy had observed that even in busiest times he often visited his rose garden as if it contained pets that were never forgotten. He once laughingly remarked that he "gave receptions there only by special invitation," and so she had never seen the spot except from a distance.

On the third morning after her birthday Amy came down very early. The bird symphony had penetrated her open windows with such a jubilant resonance that she had been awakened almost with the dawn. The air was so cool and exhilarating, and there was such a wealth of dewy beauty on every side, that she yielded to the impulse to go out and enjoy the most delightful hour of the day. To her surprise, she saw Webb going down the path leading to the garden. "What's on your conscience," she cried, "that you can't sleep?"

"What's on yours?" he retorted.

"The shame of leaving so many mornings like this unseen and not enjoyed. I mean to repent and mend my ways from this time forth; that is, if I wake up. May I go with you?"

"What a droll question!" he replied, in laughing invitation.

"Well, I did not know," she said, joining him, "but that you were going to visit that *sanctum sanctorum* of yours."

"I am. Your virtue of early rising is about to be rewarded. You know when some great personage is to be specially honored, he is given the freedom of a city or library, etc. I shall now give you the freedom of my rose garden for the rest of the summer, and from this time till frost you can always find roses for your belt. I meant to do this on your birthday, but the buds were not sufficiently forward this backward season."

"I'm not a great personage."

"No, thanks, you're not. You are only our Amy."

"I'm content. Oh, Webb, what miracles have you been working here?" she exclaimed, as she passed through some screening shrubbery, and looked upon a plot given up wholly to roses, many of which were open, more in the phase of exquisite buds, while the majority were still closely wrapped in their green calyxes.

"No miracle at all. I've only assisted nature a little. At the same time, let me assure you that this small place is like a picture-gallery, and that there is a chance here for as nice discrimination as there would be in a cabinet full of works of art. There are few duplicate roses in this place, and I have been years in selecting and winnowing this collection. They are all named varieties, labelled in my mind. I love them too well, and am too familiar with them, to hang disfiguring bits of wood upon them. One might as well label his friends. Each one has been chosen and kept because of some individual point of excellence, and you can gradually learn to recognize these characteristics just as mother does. This plot here is filled with hardy hybrid perpetuals, and that with tender tea-roses, requiring very different treatment. Here is a moss that will bloom again in the autumn. It has a sounding name — *Soupert-et-notting* — but it is worthy of any name. Though not so mossy as some others, look at its fine form and beautiful rose-color. Only one or two are out yet, but in a week this bush will be a thing of beauty that one would certainly wish might last forever. Try its fragrance. Nothing surpasses it unless it is *La France*, over there."

She inhaled the exquisite perfume in long breaths, and then looked around at the budding beauty on every side, even to the stone walls that were covered with climbing varieties. At last she turned to him with eyes that were dilated as much with wonder as with pleasure, and said: "Well, this *is* a surprise. How in the world have you found time to bring all this about? I never saw anything to equal it even in England. Of course I saw rose gardens there on a larger scale in the parks and greenhouses, but I have reference to the bushes and flowers. To me it is just a miracle."

"You are wholly mistaken. Why, Amy, an old gentleman who lives but a few miles away has had seventy distinct kinds of hybrid perpetuals in bloom at one time, and many of them the finest in existence; and yet he has but a little mite of a garden, and has been a poor, hard-working man all his life. Speaking of England, when I read of what the poor working people of Nottingham accomplished in their little bits of glass-houses and their Liliputian gardens, I know that all this is very ordinary, and within the reach of almost any one who loves the flower. After one learns how to grow roses, they do not cost much more care and trouble than a crop of onions or cabbages. The soil and location here just suit the rose. You see that the place is sheltered, and yet there are no trees near to shade them and drain the ground of its richness."

"Oh, you are sure to make it all seem simple and natural. It's a way you have," she said. "But to me it's a miracle. I don't believe there are many who have your feeling for this flower or your skill."

"You are mistaken again. The love for roses is very common, as it should be, for millions of plants are sold annually, and the trade in them is steadily increasing. Come, let me give you a lesson in the distinguishing marks of the different kinds. A rose will smell as sweet by its own name as by another, and you will find no scentless flowers here. There are some fine odorless ones, like the Beauty of Stapleford, but I give them no place."

The moments flew by unheeded until an hour had passed, and then Webb, looking at the sun, exclaimed: "I must go. This will answer for the first lesson. You can bring mother here now in her garden chair whenever she wishes to come, and I will give you other lessons, until you are a true connoisseur in roses;" and he looked at those in her cheeks as if they were more lovely than any to which he had been devoted for years.

"Well, Webb," she said, laughing, "I cannot think of anything lacking in my morning's experience. I was wakened by the song of birds. You have revealed to me the mystery of your sanctum, and that alone, you know, would be happiness to the feminine soul. You have also introduced me to dozens of your sweethearts, for you look at each rose as Burt does at the pretty girls he meets. You have shown me your budding rose garden in the dewy morning, and that was appropriate, too. Every one of your pets was gemmed and jewelled for the occasion, and unrivalled musicians, cleverly concealed in the trees near, have filled every moment with melody. What more could I ask? But where are you going with that basket?"

"To gather strawberries for breakfast. There are enough ripe this morning. You gather roses in the other basket. Why should we not have them for breakfast, also?"

"Why not, indeed, since it would seem that there are to be thousands here and elsewhere in the garden? Fresh roses and strawberries for breakfast — that's country life to perfection. Good-by."

He went away as if in a dream, and his heart almost ached with a tension of feeling that he could not define. It seemed to him the culmination of all that he had loved and enjoyed. His rose garden had been complete at this season the year before, but now that Amy had entered it, the roses that she had touched, admired, and kissed with lips that vied with their petals grew tenfold more beautiful, and the spot seemed sacred to her alone. He could never enter it again without thinking of her and seeing her lithe form bending to favorites which hitherto he had only associated with his mother. His life seemed so full and his happiness so deep that he did not want to think, and would not analyze according to his habit.

He brought the strawberries to Amy in the breakfast-room, and stood near while she and Johnnie hulled them. He saw the roses arranged by his mother's plate in such nice harmony that one color did not destroy another. He replied to her mirthful words and rallyings, scarcely knowing what he said, so deep was the feeling that oppressed him, so strong was his love for that sweet sister who had come into his life and made it ideally perfect. She appreciated what he had loved so fully, her very presence had ever kindled his spirit, and while eager to learn and easily taught, how truly she was teaching him a philosophy of life that seemed divine! What more could he desire? The day passed in a confused maze of thought and happiness, so strange and absorbing that he dared not speak lest he should waken as from a dream. The girl had grown so beautiful to him that he scarcely wished to look at her, and hastened through his meals that he might be alone with his thoughts. The sun had sunk, and the moon was well over the eastern mountains, before he visited the rose garden. Amy was there, and she greeted him with a pretty petulance because he had not come before. Then, in sudden compunction, she asked:

"Don't you feel well, Webb? You have been so quiet since we were here this morning! Perhaps you are sorry you let me into this charmed seclusion."

"No, Amy, I am not," he said, with an impetuosity very unusual in him. "You should know me better than even to imagine such a thing."

Before he could say anything more, Burt's mellow voice rang out, "Amy!"

"Oh, I half forgot; I promised to take a drive with Burt this evening. Forgive me, Webb," she added, gently; "I only spoke in sport. I do know you too well to imagine I am unwelcome here. No one ever had a kinder or more patient brother than you have been to me;" and she clasped her hands upon his arm, and looked up into his face with frank affection.

His arm trembled under her touch, and he felt that he must be alone. In his usual quiet tones, however, he was able to say: "You, rather, must forgive me that I spoke so hastily. No; I'm not ill, but very tired. A good night's rest will bring me around. Go and enjoy your drive to the utmost."

"Webb, you work too hard," she said, earnestly. "But Burt is calling —"

"Yes; do not keep him waiting; and think of me," he added, laughing, "as too weary for moonlight, roses, or anything but prosaic sleep. June is all very well, but it brings a pile of work to a fellow like me."

"Oh, Webb, what a clodhopper you're trying to make yourself out to be! Well, 'Sleep, sleep' — I can't think of the rest of the quotation. Good-by. Yes, I'm coming!" rang out her clear voice; and, with a smiling glance backward, she hastened away.

From the shrubbery he watched her pass up the wide garden path, the moonlight giving an ethereal beauty to her slight form with its white, close drapery. Then, deeply troubled, he threw himself on a rustic seat near the wall, and buried his face in his hands. It was all growing too clear to him now, and he found himself face to face with the conviction that Amy was no longer his sister, but the woman he loved. The deep-hidden current of feeling that had been gathering volume for months at last flashed out into the light, and there could be no more disguise. The explanation of her power over him was now given to his deepest consciousness. By some law of his nature, when she spoke he had ever listened; whatever she said and did had been invested with a nameless charm. Day after day they had been together, and their lives had harmonized like two chords that blend in one sweet sound. He had never had a sister, and his growing interest in Amy had seemed the most natural thing in the world; that Burt should love her, equally natural — to fall in love was almost a habit with the mercurial young fellow when thrown into the society of a pretty girl — and he had felt that he should be only too glad that his brother had at last fixed his thoughts on one who would not be a stranger to them. He now remembered that, while all this had been satisfactory to reason, his heart for a long time had been uttering its low, half-conscious protest. Now he knew why. The events of this long day had revealed him unto himself, because he was ripe for the knowledge.

His nature had its hard, practical business side, but he had never been content with questions of mere profit and loss. He not only had wanted the corn, but the secret of the corn's growth and existence. To search into Nature's hidden life, so that he could see through her outward forms the mechanism back of all, and trace endless diversity to simple inexorable laws, had been his pride and the promised solace of his life. His love of the rose had been to him what it is to many another hard-working man and woman — recreation, a habit, something for which he had developed the taste and feeling of a connoisseur. It had had no appreciable influence on the current of his thoughts. Amy's coming, however, had awakened the poetic side of his temperament, and, while this had taken nothing from the old, it had changed everything. Before, his life had been like nature in winter, when all things are in hard, definite outline. The feeling which she had inspired brought the transforming flowers and foliage. It was an immense addition to that which already existed, and which formed the foundation for it. For a long time he had exulted in this inflorescence of his life, as it were, and was more than content. He did not know that the spirit gifted even unconsciously with the power thus to develop his own nature must soon become to him more than a cause of an effect, more than a sister upon whom he could look with as tranquil eyes and even pulse in youth as in frosty age. But now he knew it with the absolute certainty that was characteristic of his mind when once it grasped a truth. The voice of Burt calling "Amy," after the experiences of the day, had been like a shaft of light, instantly revealing everything. For her sake more than his own he had exerted himself to the utmost to conceal the truth of that moment of bitter consciousness. He trembled as he thought of his blind, impetuous words and her look of surprise; he grew cold with dread as he remembered how easily he might have betrayed himself.

And now what should he do? what could he do but hide the truth with sleepless vigilance? He could not become his brother's rival. In the eyes of Amy and all the family Burt was her acknowledged suitor, who, having been brought to reason, was acting most rationally and honorably. Whether Amy was learning to love him or not made no difference. If she, growing conscious of her womanhood, was turning her thoughts to Burt as the one who had first sought her, and who was now cheerfully waiting until the look of shy choice and appeal came into her eyes, he could not seek to thrust his younger brother aside. If the illustration of the rose which she had forced into unnatural bloom was still true of her heart, he would be false to her and himself, as well as to Burt, should he seek her in the guise of a lover. He had felt that it was almost sacrilege to disturb her May-like girlhood; that this child of nature should be left wholly to nature's impulses and to nature's hour for awakening.

"If it only could have been, how rich and full life would be!" he thought. "We were in sympathy at almost every point. When shall I forget the hour we spent here this morning! The exquisite purity and beauty of the dawn, the roses with the dew upon them, seemed emblems of herself. Hereafter they will ever speak to me of her. That perfume that comes on the breeze to me now from the wild grapevine — the most delicate and delightful of all the odors of June — is instantly associated with her in my mind, as all things lovely in nature ever will be hereafter. How can I hide all this from her, and seem merely her quiet elderly brother? How can I meet her here to-morrow morning, and in the witchery of summer evenings, and still speak in measured tones, and look at her as I would at Johnnie? The thing is impossible until I have gained a stronger self-control. I must go away for a day or two, and I will. When I return neither Burt nor Amy shall have cause to complain;" and he strode away.

The evening mail brought an excuse. A firm to whom the Cliffords had been sending part of their produce had not given full satisfaction, and Webb announced his intention of going to the city in the morning to investigate matters. His father and Leonard approved of his purpose, and when he added that he might stay in town for two or three days, that he felt the need of a little change and rest before haying and harvest began, they all expressed their approval still more heartily.

The night was so beautiful that Burt prolonged his drive. The witchery of the romantic scenery through which he and Amy passed, and the loveliness of her profile in the pale light, almost broke down his resolution, and once, in accents much too tender, he said, "Oh, Amy, I am so happy when with you!"

"I'm happy with you also," she replied, in brusque tones, "now that you have become so sensible."

He took the hint, and said, emphatically: "Don't you ever be apprehensive or nervous when with me. I'll wait, and be 'sensible,' as you express it, till I'm gray."

Her laugh rang out merrily, but she made no other reply. He was a little nettled, and mentally vowed a constancy that would one day make her regret that laugh.

Webb had retired when Amy returned, and she learned of his plans from Maggie. "It's just the best thing he can do," she said, earnestly. "Webb's been overworking, and he needs and deserves a little rest."

In the morning he seemed so busy with his preparations that he had scarcely time to give her more than a genial off-hand greeting.

"Oh, Webb, I shall miss you so much!" she said, in parting, and her look was very kind and wistful. He did not trust himself to speak, but gave her a humorous and what seemed to her a half-incredulous smile. He puzzled her, and she thought about him and his manner of the previous day and evening not a little. With her sensitive nature, she could not approach so near the mystery that he was striving to conceal without being vaguely impressed that there was something unusual about him. The following day, however, brought a cheerful, business-like letter to his father, which was read at the dinner-table. He had straightened out matters in town and seemed to be enjoying himself. She more than once admitted that she did miss him as she would not any other member of the household. But her out-door life was very full. By the aid of her glass she made the intimate acquaintance of her favorite songsters. Every day she took Mrs. Clifford in her garden chair to the rosary, and proposed through her instruction to give Webb a surprise when he returned. She would prove to him that she could name his pets from their fragrance, form, and color as well as he himself.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A SHAM BATTLE AT WEST POINT.

BURT did his best to keep things lively, and a few days after Webb's departure said: "I've heard that there is to be a sham battle at West Point this afternoon. Suppose we go and see it."

The heavy guns from the river batteries had been awakening deep echoes among the mountains every afternoon for some time past, reminding the Cliffords that the June examinations were taking place at the Military Academy, and that there was much of interest occurring near them. Not only did Amy assent to Burt's proposition, but Leonard also resolved to go and take Maggie and the children. In the afternoon a steam-yacht bore them and many other excursionists to their destination, and they were soon skirting the grassy plain on which the military evolutions were to take place.

The scene was full of novelty and interest for Amy. Thousands of people were there, representing every walk and condition of life. Plain farmers with their wives and children, awkward country fellows with their sweethearts, dapper clerks with bleached hands and faces, were passing to and fro among ladies in Parisian toilets and with the unmistakable air of the metropolis. There were officers with stars upon their shoulders, and others, quite as important in their bearing, decorated with the insignia of a second lieutenant. Plain-looking men were pointed out as senators, and elegantly dressed men were, at a glance, seen to be nobodies. Scarcely a type was wanting among those who came to see how the nation's wards were drilled and prepared to defend the nation's honor and maintain peace at the point of the bayonet. On the piazzas of the officers' quarters were groups of favored people whose relations or distinguished claims were such as to give them this advantage over those who must stand where they could to see the pageant. The cadets in their gray uniforms were conspicuously absent, but the band was upon the plain discoursing lively music. From the enclosure within the barracks came the long roll of a drum, and all eyes turned thitherward expectantly. Soon from under the arched sally-port two companies of cadets were seen issuing on the double-quick. They crossed the plain with the perfect time and precision of a single mechanism, and passed down into a depression of the ground towards the river. After an interval the other two companies came out in like manner, and halted on the plain within a few hundred yards of this depression, their bayonets scintillating in the unclouded afternoon sun. Both parties were accompanied by mounted cadet officers. The body on the plain threw out pickets, stacked arms, and lounged at their ease. Suddenly a shot was fired to the eastward, then another, and in that direction the pickets were seen running in. With marvellous celerity the loungers on the plain seized their muskets, formed ranks, and faced towards the point from which the attack was threatened. A skirmish line was thrown out, and this soon met a similar line advancing from the depression, sloping eastward. Behind the skirmishers came a compact line of battle, and it advanced steadily until within fair musket range, when the firing became general. While the attacking party appeared to fight resolutely, it was soon observed that they made no further effort to advance, but sought only to occupy the attention of the party to which they were opposed.

The Cliffords stood on the northwestern edge of the plain near the statue of General Sedgwick, and from this point they could also see what was occurring in the depression towards the river. "Turn, Amy, quick, and see what's coming," cried

Burt. Stealing up the hillside in solid column was another body of cadets. A moment later they passed near on the double-quick, went into battle formation on the run, and with loud shouts charged the flank and rear of the cadets on the plain, who from the first had sustained the attack. These seemed thrown into confusion, for they were now between two fires. After a moment of apparent indecision they gave way rapidly in seeming defeat and rout, and the two attacking parties drew together in pursuit. When they had united, the pursued, who a moment before had seemed a crowd of fugitives, became almost instantly a steady line of battle. The order, "Charge!" rang out, and, with fixed bayonets, they rushed upon their assailants, and steadily drove them back over the plain, and down into their original position. It was all carried out with a fair degree of life-like reality. The "sing" of minie bullets was wanting, but abundance of noise and sulphurous smoke can be made with blank cartridges; and as the party attacked plucked victory from seeming defeat, the people's acclamations were loud and long.

At this point the horse of one of the cadet officers became unmanageable. They had all observed this rider during the battle, admiring the manner in which he restrained the vicious brute, but at last the animal's excitement or fear became so great that he rushed towards the crowded sidewalk and road in front of the officers' quarters. The people gave way to right and left. Burt had scarcely time to do more than encircle Amy with his arm and sweep her out of the path of the terrified beast. The cadet made heroic efforts, until it was evident that the horse would dash into the iron fence beyond the road, and then the young fellow was off and on his feet with the agility of a cat, but he still maintained his hold upon the bridle. A second later there was a heavy thud heard above the screams of women and children and the shouts of those vociferating advice. The horse fell heavily in his recoil from the fence, and in a moment or two was led limping and crestfallen away, while the cadet quietly returned to his comrades on the plain. Johnnie and little Ned were crying from fright, and both Amy and Maggie were pale and nervous; therefore Leonard led the way out of the crowd. From a more distant point they saw the party beneath the hill rally for a final and united charge, which this time proved successful, and the companies on the plain, after a stubborn resistance, were driven back to the barracks, and through the sally-port, followed by their opponents. The clouds of smoke rolled away, the band struck up a lively air, and the lines of people broke up into groups and streamed in all directions. Leonard decided that it would be best for them to return by the evening boat, and not wait for parade, since the little yacht would certainly be overcrowded at a later hour.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CHASED BY A THUNDER-SHOWER.

THE first one on the *Powell* to greet them was Webb, returning from the city. Amy thought he looked so thin as to appear almost haggard, but he seemed in the best of spirits, and professed to feel well and rested. She half imagined that she missed a certain gentleness in his words and manner towards her, but when he heard how nearly she had been trampled upon, she was abundantly satisfied by his look of deep affection and solicitude as he said: "Heaven bless your strong, ready arm, Burt!" "Oh, that it had been mine!" was his inward thought. He masked his feelings so well, however, that all perplexity passed from her mind. She was eager to visit the rose garden with him, and when there he praised her quickly acquired skill so sincerely that her face flushed with pleasure. No one seemed to enjoy the late but ample supper more than he, or to make greater havoc in the well-heaped dish of strawberries. "I tasted none like these in New York," he said. "After all, give me the old-fashioned kind. We've tried many varieties, but the Triomphe de Gand proves the most satisfactory, if one will give it the attention it deserves. The fruit ripens early and lasts till late. It is firm and good even in cool, wet weather, and positively delicious after a sunny day like this."

"I agree with you, Webb," said his mother, smiling. "It's the best of all the kinds we've had, except, perhaps, the President Wilder, but that doesn't bear well in our garden."

"Well, mother," he replied, with a laugh, "the best is not too good for you. I have a row of Wilders, however, for your especial benefit, but they're late, you know."

The next morning he went into the haying with as much apparent zest as Leonard. They began with red-top clover. The growth had been so heavy that in many places it had "lodged," or fallen, and it had to be cut with scythes. Later on, the mowing-machine would be used in the timothy fields and meadows. Amy, from her open window, watched him as he steadily bent to the work, and she inhaled with pleasure the odors from the bleeding clover, for it was the custom of the Cliffords to cut their grasses early, while full of the native juices. Rakes followed the scythes speedily, and the clover was piled up into compact little heaps, or "cocks," to sweat out its moisture rather than yield it to the direct rays of the sun.

"Oh, dear!" said Amy, at the dinner-table, "my bees won't fare so well, now that you are cutting down so much of their pasture."

"Red clover affords no pasturage for honey-bees," said Webb, laughing. "How easily he seems to laugh of late!" Amy thought. "They can't reach the honey in the long, tube-like blossoms. Here the bumble-bees have everything their way, and get it all except what is sipped by the humming-birds, with their long beaks, as they feed on the minute insects within the flowers. I've heard the question, Of what use are bumble-bees? — I like to say *bumble* best, as I did when a boy. Well, I've been told that red clover cannot be raised without this insect, which, passing from flower to flower, carries the fertilizing pollen. In Australia the rats and the field mice were so abundant that they destroyed these bees, which, as you know, make their nests on the ground, and so cats had to be imported in order to give the bumble-bees and red clover a chance for life. There is always trouble in nature unless an equilibrium is kept up. Much as I dislike cats, I must admit that they have contributed largely towards the prosperity of an incipient empire."

"When I was a boy," remarked Leonard, "I was cruel enough to catch bumble-bees and pull them apart for the sake of the sac of honey they carry."

Alf hung his head, and looked very conscious. "Own up, Alf," laughed Webb.

"Well, I ain't any worse than papa," said the boy.

All through the afternoon the musical sound of whetting the scythes with the rifle rang out from time to time, and in the evening Leonard said, "If this warm, dry weather holds till to-morrow night, we shall get in our clover in perfect condition."

On the afternoon of the following day the two-horse wagon, surmounted by the hay-rack, went into the barn again and again with its fragrant burden; but at last Amy was aroused from her book by a heavy vibration of thunder. Going to a window facing the west, she saw a threatening cloud that every moment loomed vaster and darker. The great vapory heads, tipped with light, towered rapidly, until at last the sun passed into a sudden eclipse that was so deep as to create almost a twilight. As the cloud approached, there was a low, distant, continuous sound, quite distinct fromne arer and heavier peals, which after brief and briefer intervals followed the lightning gleams athwart the gloom. She saw that the hay-makers were gathering the last of the clover, and raking, pitching, and loading with eager haste, their forms looking almost shadowy in the distance and the dim light. Their task was nearly completed, and the horses' heads were turned barnward, when a flash of blinding intensity came, with an instantaneous crash, that roared away to the eastward with deep reverberations. Amy shuddered, and covered her face with her hands. When she looked again, the clover-field and all that it contained seemed annihilated. The air was thick with dust, straws, twigs, and foliage torn away, and the gust passed over the house with a howl of fury scarcely less appalling than the thunder-peal had been. Trembling, and almost faint with fear, she strained her eyes towards the point where she had last seen Webb loading the hay-rack. The murky obscurity lightened up a little, and in a moment or two she saw him whipping the horses into a gallop. The doors of the barn stood open, and the rest of the workers had taken a cross-cut towards it, while Mr. Clifford was on the piazza, shouting for them to hurry. Great drops splashed against the window-panes, and the heavy, monotonous sound of the coming torrent seemed to approach like the rush of a locomotive. Webb, with the last load, is wheeling to the entrance of the barn. A second later, and the horses' feet resound on the planks of the floor. Then all is hidden, and the rain pours against the window like a cataract. In swift alternation of feeling she clapped her hands in applause, and ran down to meet Mr. Clifford, who, with much effort, was shutting the door against the gale. When he turned he rubbed his hands and laughed as he said, "Well, I never saw Webb chased so sharply by a thunder-shower before; but he won the race, and the clover's safe."

The storm soon thundered away to parts unknown, the setting sun spanning its retreating murkiness with a magnificent bow; long before the rain ceased the birds were exulting in jubilant chorus, and the air grew still and deliciously cool and fragrant. When at last the full moon rose over the Beacon Mountains there was not a cloud above the horizon, and Nature, in all her shower-gemmed and June-clad loveliness, was like a radiant beauty lost in revery.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE RESCUE OF A HOME.

WHO remembers when his childhood ceased? Who can name the hour when buoyant, thoughtless, half-reckless youth felt the first sobering touch of manhood, or recall the day when he passed over the summit of his life, and faced the long decline of age? As imperceptibly do the seasons blend when one passes and merges into another. There were traces of summer in May, lingering evidences of spring far into June, and even in sultry July came days in which the wind in the groves and the chirp of insects at night foretold the autumn.

The morning that followed the thunder-shower was one of warm, serene beauty. The artillery of heaven had done no apparent injury. A rock may have been riven in the mountains, a lonely tree splintered, but homes were safe, the warm earth was watered, and the air purified. With the dawn Amy's bees were out at work, gleaning the last sweets from the white clover, that was on the wane, from the flowers of the garden, field, and forest. The rose garden yielded no honey: the queen of flowers is visited by no bees. The sweetbrier, or eglantine, belonging to this family is an exception, however, and if the sweets of these wild roses could be harvested, an Ariel would not ask for daintier sustenance.

White and delicate pink hues characterize the flowers of early spring. In June the wild blossoms emulate the skies, and blue predominates. In July and August many of the more sensitive in Flora's train blush crimson under the direct gaze of the sun. Yellow hues hold their own throughout the year, from the dandelions that first star the fields to the golden-rod that flames until quenched by frost and late autumn storms.

During the latter part of June the annual roses of the garden were in all stages and conditions. Beautiful buds could be gleaned among the developing seed receptacles and matured flowers that were casting their petals on every breeze. The thrips and the disgusting rose-bug were also making havoc here and there. But an untiring vigilance watched over the rose garden. Morning, noon, and evening Webb cut away the fading roses, and Amy soon learned to aid him, for she saw that his mind was bent on maintaining the roses in this little nook at the highest attainable point of perfection. It is astonishing how greatly nature can be assisted and directed by a little skilled labor at the right time. Left to themselves, the superb varieties in the rose garden would have spent the remainder of the summer and autumn chiefly in the development of seed-vessels, and in resting after their first bloom. But the pruning-knife had been too busy among them, and the thoroughly fertilized soil sent up supplies that must be disposed of. As soon as the bushes had given what may be termed their first annual bloom they were cut back half-way to the ground, and dormant buds were thus forced into immediate growth. Meanwhile the new shoots that in spring had started from the roots were already loaded with buds, and so, by a little management and attention, the bloom would be maintained until frosty nights should bring the sleep of winter. No rose-bug escaped Webb's vigilant search, and the foliage was so often sprayed by a garden syringe with an infusion of white hellebore that thrips and slugs met their deserved fate before they had done any injury. Thus for Mrs. Clifford and Amy was maintained a supply of these exquisite flowers, which in a measure became a part of their daily food.

Nature was culminating. On every side was the fulfilment of its innumerable promises. The bluebird, with the softness of June in his notes, had told his love amid the snows and gales of March, and now, with unabated constancy, and with all a father's solicitude, he was caring for his third nestful of fledglings. Young orioles were essaying flight from their wind-rocked cradles on the outer boughs of the elms. Phœbe-birds, with nests beneath bridges over running streams, had, nevertheless, the skill to land their young on the banks. Nature was like a vast nursery, and from gardens, lawns, fields, and forest the cries and calls of feathered infancy were heard all day, and sometimes in the darkness, as owls, hawks, and other night prowlers added to the fearful sum of the world's tragedies. The cat-birds, that had built in some shrubbery near the house, had by the last of June done much to gain Amy's good-will and respect. As their domestic character and operations could easily be observed, she had visited them almost daily from the time they had laid the dry-twig and leafy foundation of their nest until its lining of fine dry grasses was completed. She had found that, although inclined to mock and gibe at outsiders, they were loyal and affectionate to each other. In their home-building, in the incubation of the deep bluish-green eggs, and in the care of the young, now almost ready to fly, they had been mutually helpful and considerate, fearless and even fierce in attacking all who approached too near their domicile. To Amy and her daily visits they had become quite reconciled, even as she had grown interested in them, in spite of a certain lack of the high breeding which characterized the thrushes and other favorites.

"My better acquaintance with them," she said one evening to Dr. Marvin, who, with his wife, had stopped at the Cliffords' in passing, "has taught me a lesson. I think I'm too much inclined to sweeping censure on the exhibition of a few disagreeable traits. I've learned that the gossips in yonder bushes have some excellent qualities, and I suppose you find that this is true of the gossips among your patients."

"Yes," replied the doctor, "but the human gossips draw the more largely on one's charity; and if you knew how many pestiferous slugs and insects your neighbors in the shrubbery have already destroyed, the human genus of gossip would suffer still more in comparison."

That Amy had become so interested in these out-door neighbors turned out to their infinite advantage, for one morning their excited cries of alarm secured her attention. Hastening to the locality of their nest, she looked upon a scene that chilled the blood in her own veins. A huge black-snake suspended his weight along the branches of the shrubbery with entire confidence and ease, and was in the act of swallowing a fledgling that, even as Amy looked, sent out its last despairing peep. The parent birds were frantic with terror, and their anguish and fearless efforts to save their young redeemed them forever in Amy's eyes.

"Webb!" she cried, since, for some reason, he ever came first to her mind in an emergency. It so happened that he had just come from the hay-field to rest awhile and prepare for dinner. In a moment he was at her side, and followed with hasty glance her pointing finger.

"Come away, Amy," he said, as he looked at her pale face and dilated eyes. "I do not wish you to witness a scene like that;" and almost by force he drew her to the piazza. In a moment he was out with a breech-loading gun, and as the smoke of the discharge lifted, she saw a writhing, sinuous form fall heavily to the earth. After a brief inspection Webb came towards her in smiling assurance, saying: "The wretch got only one of the little family. Four birds are left. There now, don't feel so badly. You have saved a home from utter desolation. That, surely, will be a pleasant thing to remember."

"What could I have done if you had not come?"

"I don't like to think of what you might have done — emulated the mother-bird, perhaps, and flown at the enemy."

"I did not know you were near when I called your name," she said. "It was entirely instinctive on my part; and I believe," she added, musingly, looking with a child's directness into his eyes, "that one's instincts are usually right; don't you?"

He turned away to hide the feeling of intense pleasure caused by her words, but only said, in a low voice, "I hope I may never fail you, Amy, when you turn to me for help." Then he added, quickly, as if hastening away from delicate ground: "While those large black-snakes are not poisonous, they are ugly customers sometimes. I have read of an instance in which a boy put his hand into the hole of a tree where there had been a bluebird's nest, and touched the cold scales of one of these snakes. The boy took to his heels, with the snake after him, and it is hard to say what would have happened had not a man ploughing near come to the rescue with a heavy ox-whip. What I should fear most in your case would be a nervous shock had the snake even approached you, for you looked as if you had inherited from Mother Eve an unusual degree of hate for the reptile."

The report of the gun had attracted Alf and others to the scene. Amy, with a look of smiling confidence, said: "Perhaps you have rescued me as well as the birds. I can't believe, though, that such a looking creature could have tempted Eve to either good or evil;" and she entered the house, leaving him in almost a friendly mood towards the cause of the cat-bird's woe.

Alf exulted over the slain destroyer, and even Johnnie felt no compunction at the violent termination of its life. The former, with much sportsmanlike importance, measured it, and at the dinner-table announced its length to be a little over four feet.

"By the way," said Webb, "your adventure, Amy, reminds me of one of the finest descriptions I ever read;" and jumping up, he obtained from the library Burroughs's account of a like scene and rescue. "I will just give you some glimpses of the picture," he said, reading the following sentences: "'Three or four yards from me was the nest, beneath which, in long festoons, rested a huge black-snake. I can conceive of nothing more overpoweringly terrible to an unsuspecting family of birds than the sudden appearance above their domicile of the head and neck of this arch-enemy. One thinks of the great myth of the tempter and the cause of all our woe, and wonders if the Arch-One is not playing off some of his pranks before him. Whether we call it snake or devil matters little. I could but admire his terrible beauty, however; his black, shining folds; his easy, gliding movement — head erect, eyes glistening, tongue playing like subtile flame, and the invisible means of his almost winged locomotion. Presently, as he came gliding down the slender body of a leaning alder, his attention was attracted by a slight movement of my arm; eying me an instant with that crouching, utter, motionless gaze which I believe only snakes and devils can assume, he turned quickly,' " etc.

Amy shuddered, and Mrs. Clifford looked a little troubled that the scene in Eden should be spoken of as merely a "myth." When she was a child "Paradise Lost" had been her story-book, and the stories had become real to her. Burt, however, not to be outdone, recalled his classics.

"By the way," he said, "I can almost parallel your description from the 'Iliad' of Homer. I won't pretend that I can give you the Greek, and no doubt it would be Greek to you. I'll get even with you, Webb, however, and read an extract from Pope's translation," and he also made an excursion to the library. Returning, he said, "Don't ask me for the connection," and read:

" 'Straight to the tree his sanguine spires he rolled,
And curled around in many a winding fold.
The topmost branch a mother-bird possessed;
Eight callow infants filled the mossy nest;
Herself the ninth: the serpent as he hung
Stretched his black jaws, and crashed the crying young;
While hovering near, with miserable moan,
The drooping mother wailed her children gone.
The mother last, as round the nest she flew,
Seized by the beating wing, the monster slew.' "

"Bravo!" cried Leonard. "I am now quite reconciled to your four years at college. Heretofore I had thought you had passed through it as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego passed through the fiery furnace, without even the smell of fire upon their garments, but I now at last detect a genuine Greek aroma."

"I think Burt's quotation very pat," said Amy, "and I could not have believed that anything written so long ago would apply so marvellously to what I have seen to-day."

"Marvellously pat, indeed," said Leonard. "And since your quotation has led to such a nice little pat on your classical back, Burt, you must feel repaid for your long burning of the midnight oil."

Burt flushed slightly, but he turned Leonard's shafts with smiling assurance, and said: "Amply repaid. I have ever had an abiding confidence that my education would be of use to me at some time."

The long days grew hot, and often sultry, but the season brought unremitting toil. The click of the mowing-machine, softened by distance, came from field after field. As the grain in the rye grew plump and heavy, the heads drooped more and more, and changed from a pale yellow to the golden hue that announced the hour of harvest. In smooth and level fields the reaping-machine also lightened and expedited labor; but there was one upland slope that was too rough for anything except the old-fashioned cradle. On a breezy afternoon Amy went out to sketch the harvesters, and from the shade of an adjacent tree to listen to the rhythmical rush and rustle as the blade passed through the hollow stocks, and the cradle dropped the gathered wealth in uniform lines. Almost immediately the prostrate grain was transformed into tightly girthed sheaves. How black Abram's great paw looked as he twisted a wisp of straw, bound together the yellow stalks, and tucked under the end of his improvised rope!

Webb was leading the reapers, and they had to step quickly to keep pace with him. As Amy appeared upon the scene he had done no more than take off his hat and wave it to her, but as the men circled round the field near her again, she saw that her acquaintance of the mountain cabin was manfully bringing up the rear. Every time, before Lumley stooped to the sweep of his cradle, she saw that he stole a glance towards her, and she recognized him with cordial good-will. He, too, doffed his hat in grateful homage, and as he paused a moment in his honest toil, and stood erect, he unconsciously asserted the manhood that she had restored to him. She caught his attitude, and he became the subject of her sketch. Rude and simple though it was, it would ever recall to her a pleasant picture — the diminishing area of standing rye, golden in the afternoon sunshine, with light billows running over it before the breeze, Webb leading, with the strong, assured progress that would ever characterize his steps through life, and poor Lumley, who had been wronged by generations that had passed away, as well as by his own evil, following in an honest emulation which she had evoked.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A MIDNIGHT TEMPEST.

AS far as possible, the prudent Leonard, who was commander-in-chief of the harvest campaign, had made everything snug before the Fourth of July, which Alf ushered in with untimely patriotic fervor. Almost before the first bird had taken its head from under its wing to look for the dawn, he had fired a salute from a little brass cannon. Not very long afterwards the mountains up and down the river were echoing with the thunder of the guns at West Point and Newburgh. The day bade fair to justify its proverbial character for sultriness. Even in the early morning the air was languid and the heat oppressive. The sun was but a few hours high before the song of the birds almost ceased, with the exception of the somewhat sleepy whistling of the orioles. They are half tropical in nature as well as plumage, and their manner during the heat of the day is like that of languid Southern beauties. They kept flitting here and there through their leafy retirement in a mild form of restlessness, exchanging soft notes — pretty nonsense, no doubt — which often terminated abruptly, as if they had not energy enough to complete the brief strain attempted.

Alf, with his Chinese crackers and his cannon, and Johnnie and Ned, with their torpedoes, kept things lively during the forenoon, but their elders were disposed to lounge and rest. The cherry-trees, laden with black and white ox-hearts, were visited. One of the former variety was fairly sombre with the abundance of its dark-hued fruit, and Amy's red lips grew purple as Burt threw her down the largest and ripest from the topmost boughs. Webb, carrying a little basket lined with grapevine leaves, gleaned the long row of Antwerp raspberries. The first that ripen of this kind are the finest and most delicious, and their strong aroma announced his approach long before he reached the house. His favorite Triomphe de Gand strawberries, that had supplied the table three weeks before, were still yielding a fair amount of fruit, and his mother was never without her dainty dish of pale red berries, to which the sun had been adding sweetness with the advancing season until nature's combination left nothing to be desired.

By noon the heat was oppressive, and Alf and Ned were rolling on the grass under a tree, quite satiated for a time with two elements of a boy's elysium, fire-crackers and cherries. The family gathered in the wide hall, through the open doors of which was a slight draught of air. All had donned their coolest costumes, and their talk was quite as languid as the occasional notes and chirpings of the birds without. Amy was reading a magazine in a very desultory way, her eyelids drooping over every page before it was finished, Webb and Burt furtively admiring the exquisite hues that the heat brought into her face, and the soft lustre of her eyes. Old Mr. Clifford nodded over his newspaper until his spectacles clattered to the floor, at which they all laughed, and asked for the news. His invalid wife lay upon the sofa in dreamy, painless repose. To her the time was like a long, quiet nooning by the wayside of life, with all her loved band around her, and her large, dark eyes rested on one and another in loving, lingering glances — each so different, yet each so dear! Sensible Leonard was losing no time, but was audibly resting in a great wooden rocking-chair at the farther end of the hall. Maggie only, the presiding genius of the household, was not wilted by the heat. She flitted in and out occasionally, looking almost girlish in her white wrapper. She had the art of keeping house, of banishing dust and disorder without becoming an embodiment of dishevelled disorder herself. No matter what she was doing, she always appeared trim and neat, and in the lover-like expression of her husband's eyes, as they often followed her, she had her reward. She was not deceived by the semi-torpid condition of the household, and knew well what would be expected in a Fourth-of-July dinner. Nor was she disappointed. The tinkle of the bell at two o'clock awakened unusual animation, and then she had her triumph. Leonard beamed upon a hind-quarter of lamb roasted to the nicest turn of brownness. A great dish of Champion-of-England pease, that supreme product of the kitchen-garden, was one of the time-honored adjuncts, while new potatoes, the first of which had been dug that day, had half thrown off their mottled jackets in readiness for the feast. Nature had been Maggie's handmaid in spreading that table, and art, with its culinary mysteries and combinations, was conspicuously absent. If Eve had had a kitchen range and the Garden of Eden to draw upon, Adam could scarcely have fared better than did the Clifford household that day. The dishes heaped with strawberries, raspberries, cherries, and white grape-currants that had been gathered with the dew upon them might well tempt the most *blasé* resident of a town to man's primal calling.

Before they reached their iced tea, which on this hot day took the place of coffee, there was a distant peal of thunder.

"I knew it would come," said old Mr. Clifford. "We shall have a cool night, after all."

"A Fourth rarely passes without showers," Leonard remarked. "That's why I was so strenuous about getting all our grass and grain that was down under cover yesterday."

"You are not the only prudent one," Maggie added, complacently. "I've made my currant jelly, and it jellied beautifully: it always does if I make it before the Fourth and the showers that come about this time. It's queer, but a rain on the currants after they are fairly ripe almost spoils them for jelly."

The anticipations raised by the extreme sultriness were fulfilled at first only in part. Instead of a heavy shower accompanied by violent gusts, there was a succession of tropical and vertical down-pourings, with now and then a sharp flash and a rattling peal, but usually a heavy monotone of thunder from bolts flying in the distance. One great cloud did not sweep across the sky like a concentrated charge, leaving all clear behind it, as is so often the case, but, as if from an immense reserve, Nature appeared to send out her vapory forces by battalions. Instead of enjoying the long siesta which she had promised herself, Amy spent the afternoon in watching the cloud scenery. A few miles southwest of the house was a prominent highland that happened to be in the direct line of the successive showers. This formed a sort of gauge of their advance. A cloud would loom up behind it, darken it, obscure it until it faded out even as a shadow; then the nearer spurs of the mountains would be blotted out, and in eight or ten minutes even the barn and the adjacent groves would be but dim outlines through the myriad rain-drops. The cloud would soon be well to the eastward, the dim landscape take form and distinctness, and the distant highland appear again, only to be obscured in like manner within the next half-hour. It was as if invisible and Titanic gardeners were stepping across the country with their watering-pots.

Burt and Webb sat near Amy at the open window, the former chatting easily, and often gayly. Webb, with his deep-set eyes fixed on the clouds, was comparatively silent. At last he rose somewhat abruptly, and was not seen again until evening, when he seemed to be in unusually good spirits. As the dusk deepened he aided Alf and Johnnie in making the finest possible display of their fireworks, and for half an hour the excitement was intense. The family applauded from the piazza. Leonard and his father, remembering the hay and grain already stored in the barn, congratulated each other that the recent showers had prevented all danger from sparks.

After the last rocket had run its brief, fiery course, Alf and

Johnnie were well content to go with Webb, Burt, and Amy to an upper room whose windows looked out on Newburgh Bay and to the westward. Near and far, from their own and the opposite side of the river, rockets were flaming into the sky, and Roman candles sending up their globes of fire. But Nature was having a celebration of her own, which so far surpassed anything terrestrial that it soon won their entire attention. A great black cloud that hung darkly in the west was the background for the electric pyrotechnics. Against this obscurity the lightning played almost every freak imaginable. At one moment there would be an immense illumination, and the opaque cloud would become vivid gold. Again, across its blackness a dozen fiery rills of light would burn their way in zigzag channels, and not infrequently a forked bolt would blaze earthward. Accompanying these vivid and central effects were constant illuminations of sheet-lightning all round the horizon, and the night promised to be a carnival of thunder-showers throughout the land. The extreme heat continued, and was rendered far more oppressive by the humidity of the atmosphere.

The awful grandeur of the cloud scenery at last so oppressed Amy that she sought relief in Maggie's lighted room. As we have already seen, her sensitive organization was peculiarly affected by an atmosphere highly charged with electricity. She was not re-assured, for Leonard inadvertently remarked that it would take "a rousing old-fashioned storm to cool and clear the air."

"Why, Amy," exclaimed Maggie, "how pale you are! and your eyes shine as if some of the lightning had got into them."

"I wish it was morning," said the girl. "Such a sight oppresses me like a great foreboding of evil;" and, with a restlessness she could not control, she went down to Mrs. Clifford's room. She found Mr. Clifford fanning the invalid, who was almost faint from the heat. Amy took his place, and soon had the pleasure of seeing her charge drop off into quiet slumber. As Mr. Clifford was very weary also, Amy left them to their rest, and went to the sitting-room, where Webb was reading. Burt had fallen asleep on the lounge in the hall. Leonard's prediction promised to come true. The thunder muttered nearer and nearer, but it was a sullen, slow, remorseless approach through the absolute silence and darkness without, and therefore was tenfold more trying to one nervously apprehensive than a swift, gusty storm would have been in broad day.

Webb looked up and greeted her with a smile. His lamp was shaded, and the room shadowy, so that he did not note that Amy was troubled and depressed. "Shall I read to you?" he asked. "I am running over Hawthorne's 'English Note-Books' again."

"Yes," she said, in a low voice; and she sat down with her back to the windows, through which shone momentarily the glare of the coming tempest. He had not read a page before a long, sullen peal rolled across the entire arc of the sky. "Webb," faltered Amy, and she rose and took an irresolute step towards him.

His pre-occupation was instantly gone. Never had he heard sweeter music than that low appeal, to which the deep echoes in the mountains formed a strange accompaniment. He stepped to her side, took her hand, and found it cold and trembling. Drawing her within the radiance of the lamp, he saw how pale she was, and that her eyes were dilated with nervous dread.

"Webb," she began again, "do you — do you think there is danger?"

"No, Amy," he said, gently; "there is no danger for you in God's universe."

"Oh, that frightful glare!" and she buried her face on his shoulder. "Webb," she whispered, "won't you stay up till the storm is over? And you won't think me weak or silly either, will you? Indeed, I can't help it. I wish I had a little of your courage and strength."

"I like you best as you are," he said; "and all my strength is yours when you need it. I understand you, Amy, and well know you cannot help this nervous dread. I saw how these electrical storms affected you last February, and such experiences are not rare with finely organized natures. See, I can explain it all with my matter-of-fact philosophy. But, believe me, there is no danger. Certainly I will stay with you. What would I not do for you?" he could not help adding.

She looked at him affectionately as she said, with a child's unconscious frankness: "I don't know why it is, but I always feel safe when with you. I often used to wish that I had a brother, and imagine what he would be to me; but I never dreamed that a brother could be so much to me as you are. — Oh, Webb!" and she almost clung to him, as the heavy thunder pealed nearer than before.

Involuntarily he encircled her with his arm, and drew her closer to him in the impulse of protection. She felt his arm tremble, and wholly misinterpreted the cause. Springing aloof, she clasped her hands, and looked around almost wildly.

"Oh, Webb," she cried, "there is danger. Even you tremble."

Webb was human, and had nerves also, but all the thunder that ever roared could not affect them so powerfully as Amy's head bowed upon his shoulder, and the appealing words of her absolute trust. He mastered himself instantly, however, for he saw that he must be strong and calm in order to sustain the trembling girl through one of Nature's most awful moods. She was equally sensitive to the smiling beauty and the wrath of the great mother. The latter phase was much the same to her as if a loved face had suddenly become black with reckless passion. He took both her hands in a firm grasp, and said: "Amy, I am not afraid, and you must not be. You can do much towards self-control. Come," he added, in tones almost authoritative, "sit here by me, and give me your hand. I shall read to you in a voice as quiet and steady as you ever heard me use."

She obeyed, and he kept his word. His strong, even grasp re-assured her in a way that excited her wonder, and the nervous paroxysm of fear began to pass away. While she did not comprehend what he read, his tones and expression had their influence. His voice, however, was soon drowned by the howling of the tempest as it rushed upon them. He felt her hand tremble again, and saw her look apprehensively towards the windows.

"Amy," he said, and in smiling confidence he fixed his eyes on hers and held them.

The crisis of the storm was indeed terrific. The house rocked in the furious blasts. The uproar without was frightful, suggesting that the Evil One was in very truth the "prince of the power of the air," and that he was abroad with all his legions. Amy trembled violently, but Webb's hand and eyes held hers. "Courage!" he said, cheerily; "the storm is passing."

A wan, grateful smile glimmered for a moment on her pale face, and then her expression passed into one of horror. With a cry that was lost in a deafening crash, she sprang into his arms. Even Webb was almost stunned and blinded for a moment. Then he heard rapid steps. Burt at last had been aroused from the slumber of youth, and, fortunately for his peace, rushed first into his mother's room. Webb thought Amy had fainted, and he laid her gently on the lounge. "Don't leave me," she gasped, faintly.

"Amy," he said, earnestly, "I assure you that all danger is now over. As I told you once before, the centre of the storm has passed. You know I never deceived you."

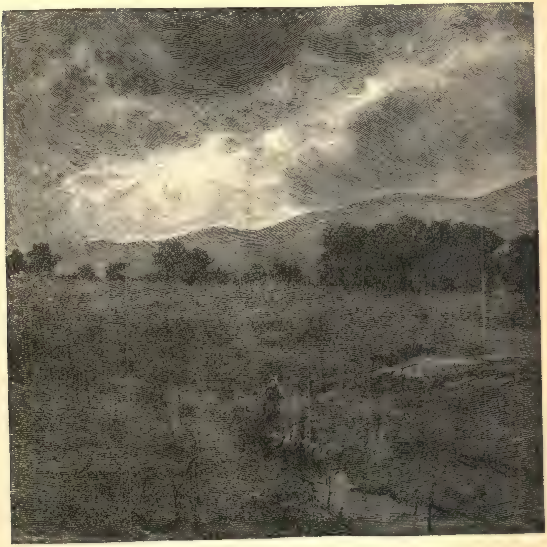
Maggie and Burt now came running in, and Webb said, "Amy has had a faint turn. I will get her a glass of water."

This revived her speedily, but the truth of Webb's words proved more efficacious. The gale was sweeping the storm from the sky. The swish of the torrents mattered little, for the thunder-peals died away steadily to the eastward. Amy made a great effort to rally, for she felt ashamed of her weakness, and feared that the others would not interpret her as charitably as Webb had done. In a few minutes he smilingly withdrew, and went out on the rear porch with Leonard, whence they anxiously scanned the barn and out-buildings. These were evidently safe, wherever the bolt had fallen, and it must have struck near. In half an hour there was a line of stars along the western horizon, and soon the repose within the old house was as deep as that of nature without.

Webb only was sleepless. He sat at his open window, and saw the clouds roll away. But he felt that a cloud deeper and murkier than any that had ever blackened the sky hung over his life. He knew too well why his arm had trembled when for a moment it encircled Amy. The deepest and strongest impulse of his soul was to protect her, and her instinctive appeal to him had raised a tempest in his heart as wild as that which had raged without. He felt that he could not yield her to another, not even to his brother. Nature itself pointed her to him. It was to him she turned and clung in her fears. And yet she had not even dreamed of his untold wealth of love, and probably never would suspect it. He could not reveal it — indeed, it must be the struggle of his life to hide it — and she, while loving him as a brother, might easily drift into an engagement and marriage with Burt. Could he be patient, and wear a smiling mask through it all? That tropical night and its experiences taught him anew that he had a human heart, with all its passionate cravings. When he came down from his long vigil on the following morning his brow was as serene as the scene without. Amy gave him a grateful and significant smile, and he smiled back so naturally that observant Burt, who had been a little uneasy over the events of the previous night, was wholly relieved of anxiety. They had scarcely seated themselves at the breakfast-table before Alf came running in, and said that an elm not a hundred yards from the house had been splintered from the topmost branch to the roots. All except Mrs. Clifford went out to look at the smitten tree, and they gazed with awe at the deep furrow ploughed in the blackened wood.

"It will live," said Webb, quietly, as he turned away; "it will probably live out its natural life."

Amy, in her deep sympathy, looked after him curiously. There was something in his tone and manner which suggested a meaning beyond his words. Not infrequently he had puzzled her of late, and this added to her interest in him. She understood Burt thoroughly.



CLOUDING UP.

Good old Mr. Clifford saw in the shattered tree only reasons for profound thankfulness, and words of Christian gratitude rose to his lips.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TWO LOVERS.

THE July sun speedily drank up the superabundant moisture, and the farm operations went on with expedition. The corn grew green and strong, and its leaves stretched up to Abram's shoulder as he ran the cultivator through it for the last time. The moist sultriness of the Fourth finished the ox-heart cherries. They decayed at once, to Alf's great regret. "That is the trouble with certain varieties of cherries," Webb remarked. "One shower will often spoil the entire crop even before it is ripe." But it so happened that there were several trees of native or ungrafted fruit on the place, and these supplied the children and the birds for many days thereafter. The robins never ceased gorging themselves. Indeed, they were degenerating into shameless *gourmands*, and losing the grace of song, as were also the bobolinks in the meadows. Already there was a perceptible decline in the morning and evening minstrelsy of all the birds, and, with the exception of calls and twitterings, they grew more and more silent through the midday heat. With the white bloom of the chestnut-trees the last trace of spring passed away. Summer reached its supreme culmination, and days that would not be amiss at the equator were often followed by nights of breathless sultriness. Early in the month haying and harvest were over, and the last load that came down the lane to the barn was ornamented with green boughs, and hailed with acclamations by the farm hands, to whom a generous supper was given, and something substantial also to take home to their families.

As the necessity for prompt action and severe labor passed, the Cliffords proved that their rural life was not one of plodding, unredeemed toil. For the next few weeks Nature would give them a partial respite. She would finish much of the work which they had begun. The corn would mature, the oats ripen, without further intervention on their part. By slow but sure alchemy the fierce suns would change the acid and bitter juices in the apples, peaches, plums, and pears into nectar. Already Alf was revelling in the harvest apples, which, under Maggie's culinary magic, might tempt an ascetic to surfeit.

While Burt had manfully done his part in the harvest-field, he had not made as long hours as the others, and now was quite inclined to enjoy to the utmost a season of comparative leisure. He was much with Amy, and she took pleasure in his society, for, as she characterized his manner in her thoughts, he had grown very sensible. He had accepted the situation, and he gave himself not a little credit for his philosophical patience. He regarded himself as committed to a deep and politic plan, in which, however, there was no unworthy guile. He would make himself essential to Amy's happiness. He would be so quietly and naturally devoted to her that she would gradually come to look forward to a closer union as a matter of course. He also made it clear to her that she had no rivals in his thoughts, or even admiration, and, as far as courtesy permitted, withdrew from the society of a few favorites who once had welcomed him gladly and often. He had even pretended indifference to the advent of a dark-eyed beauty to the neighborhood, and had made no efforts to form her acquaintance. This stranger from the city was so charming, however, that he had felt more than once that he was giving no slight proof of constancy. His fleet horse Thunder was his great ally, and in the long twilight evenings, he, with Amy, explored the country roads far and near. When the early mornings were not too warm they rowed upon the river, or went up the Moodna Creek for water-lilies, which at that hour floated upon the surface with their white petals all expanded — beautiful emblems of natures essentially good. From mud and slime they developed purity and fragrance. He was also teaching Amy to be an expert horsewoman, and they promised themselves many a long ride when autumn coolness should make such exercise more agreeable.

Burt was a little surprised at his tranquil enjoyment of all this companionship, but nevertheless prided himself upon it. He was not so mercurial and impetuous as the others had believed him to be, but was capable of a steady and undemonstrative devotion. Amy was worth winning at any cost, and he proposed to lay such a patient siege that she could not fail to become his. Indeed, with a disposition towards a little retaliation, he designed to carry his patience so far as to wait until he had seen more than once an expression in her eyes that invited warmer words and manner. But he had to admit that time was passing, and that no such expression appeared. This piqued him a little, and he felt that he was not appreciated. The impression grew upon him that she was very young — unaccountably young for one of her years. She enjoyed his bright talk and merry ways with much the same spirit that Alf's boyish exuberance called forth. She had the natural love of all young, healthful natures for pleasure and change, and she unconsciously acted towards him as if he were a kind, jolly brother who was doing much to give the spice of variety to her life. At the same time her unawakened heart was disposed to take his view of the future. Why should she not marry him, after her girlhood had passed? All the family wished and expected it, and surely she liked him exceedingly. But it would be time enough for such thoughts years hence. He had the leisure and self-control for good-comradeship, and without questioning she enjoyed it. Her life was almost as free from care as that of the young birds that had begun their existence in June.

Only Webb perplexed and troubled her a little. At this season, when even Leonard indulged in not a little leisure and rest, he was busy and pre-occupied. She could not say that he avoided her, and yet it seemed to happen that they were not much together. "I fear I'm too young and girlish to be a companion for him," she sighed. "His manner is just as kind and gentle, but he treats me as if I were his very little sister. I don't seem to have the power to interest him that I once had. I wish I knew enough to talk to him as he would like;" and she stealthily tried to read some of the scientific books that she saw him poring over.

He, poor fellow, was engaged in the most difficult task ever given to man — the ruling of his own spirit. He saw her sisterly solicitude and good-will, but could not respond in a manner as natural as her own. This was beyond human capability. His best resource was the comparative solitude of constant occupation. He was growing doubtful, however, as to the result of his struggle, while Amy was daily becoming more lovely in his eyes. Her English life had not destroyed the native talent of an American girl to make herself attractive. She knew instinctively how to dress, how to enhance the charms of which nature had not been chary, and Webb's philosophy and science were no defence against her winsomeness. In her changeful eyes lurked spells too mighty for him. Men of his caste rarely succumb to a learned and aggressive woman. They require intelligence, but it is a feminine intelligence, which supplements their own, and is not akin to it. Webb saw in Amy all that his heart craved, and he believed that he also saw her fulfilling Burt's hopes. She seemed to be gradually learning that the light-hearted brother might bring into her life all the sunshine and happiness she could desire. Webb depreciated himself, and believed that he was too grave and dull to win in any event more than the affection which she would naturally feel for an elder brother, and this she already bestowed upon him frankly and unstintedly. Burt took the same view, and was usually complacency itself, although a week seemed a long time to him, and he sometimes felt that he ought to be making more progress. But he had no misgivings. He would be faithful for years, and Amy could not fail to reward such constancy.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BURT'S ADVENTURE.

NOT only had the little rustic cottages which had been placed on poles here and there about the Clifford dwelling, and the empty tomato-cans which Alf, at Dr. Marvin's suggestion, had fastened in the trees, been occupied by wrens and bluebirds, but larger homes had been taken for the summer by migrants from the city. Among these was a Mr. Hargrove, a wealthy gentleman, who had rented a pretty villa on the banks of the Hudson, a mile or two away. Burt, with all his proposed lifelong constancy, had speedily discovered that Mr. Hargrove had a very pretty daughter. Of course, he was quite indifferent to the fact, but he could no more meet a girl like Gertrude Hargrove and be unobservant than could Amy pass a new and rare wildflower with unregarding eyes. Miss Hargrove was not a wildflower, however. She was a product of city life, and was perfectly aware of her unusual and exotic beauty. Admiring eyes had followed her even from childhood, and no one better than she knew her power. Her head had been quite turned by flattery, but there was a saving clause in her nature — her heart. She was a belle, but not a cold-blooded coquette. Admiration was like sunshine — a matter of course. She had always been accustomed to it, as she had been to wealth, and neither had spoiled her. Beneath all that was artificial, all that fashion prescribed and society had taught, was the essential womanhood which alone can win and retain a true man's homage. For reasons just the reverse of those which explained Amy's indisposition to sentiment, she also had been kept fancy-free. Seclusion and the companionship of her father, who had been an invalid in his later years, had kept the former a child in many respects, at a time when Miss Hargrove had her train of admirers. Miss Gertrude enjoyed the train very much, but showed no disposition to permit any one of its constituents to monopolize her. Indeed, their very numbers had been her safety. Her attention had been divided and distracted by a score of aspirants, and while in her girlish eyes some found more favor than others, she was inclined to laughing criticism of them all. They amused her immensely, and she puzzled them. Her almost velvety black eyes, and the rich, varying tints of her clear brunette complexion, suggested a nature that was not cold and unresponsive, yet many who would gladly have won the heiress for her own sake found her as elusive as only a woman of perfect tact and self-possession can be. She had no vulgar ambition to count her victims who had committed themselves in words. With her keen intuition and abundant experience she recognized the first glance that was warmer than mere friendliness, and this was all the committal she wished for. She loved the admiration of men, but was too good-hearted a girl to wish to make them cynics in regard to women. She also had the sense to know that it is a miserable triumph to lure a man to the declaration of a supreme regard, and then in one moment change it into contempt. While, therefore, she had refused many an offer, no one had been humiliated, no one had been made to feel that he had been unworthily trifled with. Thus she retained the respect and good-will of those to whom she might easily have become the embodiment of all that was false and heartless. She had welcomed the comparative seclusion of the villa on the Hudson, for, although not yet twenty, she was growing rather weary of society and its exactions. Its pleasures had been tasted too often, its burdens were beginning to be felt. She was a good horsewoman, and was learning, under the instruction of a younger brother, to row as easily and gracefully on the river as she danced in the ball-room, and she found the former recreation more satisfactory, from its very novelty.

Burt was well aware of these out-door accomplishments. Any one inclined to rural pleasures won his attention at once; and Miss Hargrove, as she occasionally trotted smartly by him, or skimmed near on the waters of the Hudson, was a figure sure to win from his eyes more than a careless glance. Thus far, as has been intimated, he had kept aloof, but he had observed her critically, and he found little to disapprove. She also was observing him, and was quite as well endowed as he with the power of forming a correct judgment. Men of almost every description had sought her smiles, but he did not suffer by comparison. His tall, lithe figure was instinct with manly grace. There was a fascinating trace of reckless boldness in his blue eyes. He rode like a centaur, and at will made his light boat, in which Amy was usually seated, cut through the water with spray flying from its prow. In Miss Hargrove's present mood for rural life she wished for his acquaintance, and was a little piqued that he had not sought hers, since her father had opened the way.

Mr. Hargrove, soon after his arrival in the neighborhood, had had business transactions with the Cliffords, and had learned enough about them to awaken a desire for social relations, and he had courteously expressed his wishes. Maggie and Amy had fully intended compliance, but the harvest had come, time had passed, and the initial call had not been made. Leonard was averse to such formalities, and, for reasons already explained, Burt and Webb were in no mood for them. They would not have failed in neighborliness much longer, however, and a call was proposed for the first comparatively cool day. A little incident now occurred which quite broke the ice, and also somewhat disturbed Burt's serenity. Amy was not feeling very well, and he had gone out alone for a ride on his superb black horse Thunder. In a shady road some miles away, where the willows interlaced their branches overhead in a long, Gothic-like arch, he saw Miss Hargrove, mounted also, coming slowly towards him. He never forgot the picture she made under the rustic archway. Her fine horse was pacing along with a stately tread, his neck curved under the restraining bit, while she was evidently amusing herself by talking, for the want of a better companion, to an immense Newfoundland dog that was trotting at her side, and looking up to her in intelligent appreciation. Thus, in her pre-occupation, Burt was permitted to draw comparatively near, but as soon as she observed him it was evidently her intention to pass rapidly. As she gave her horse the rein and he leaped forward, she clutched his mane, and by a word brought him to a standstill. Burt saw the trouble at once, for the girth of her saddle had broken, and hung loosely down. Only by prompt action and good horsemanship had she kept her seat. Now she was quite helpless, for an attempt to dismount would cause the heavy saddle to turn, with unknown and awkward results. She had recognized Burt, and knew that he was a gentleman; therefore she patted her horse and quieted him, while the young man came promptly to her assistance. He, secretly exulting over the promise of an adventure, said, suavely, as he lifted his hat,

"Miss Hargrove, will you permit me to aid you?"

"Certainly," she replied, smiling so pleasantly that the words did not seem ungracious; "I have no other resource."

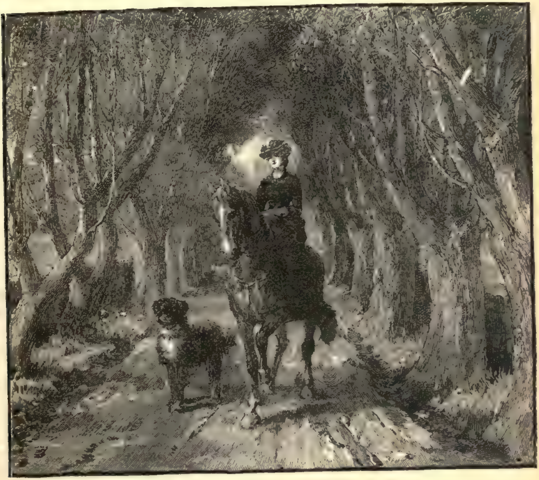
He bowed, leaped lightly to the ground, and fastened his horse by the roadside; then came forward without the least embarrassment. "Your saddle-girth has broken," he said. "I fear you must dismount. Shall I lift you off? You maintained your seat admirably, but a very slight movement on your part will cause the saddle to turn."

"I know that," she replied, laughing. "Helplessness is always awkward. I am only anxious to reach ground in safety;" and she dropped the reins, and held out her hands.

"Your horse is too high for you to dismount in that way," he said, quietly, "and the saddle might fall after you and hurt you.

Pardon me;" and he encircled her with his right arm, and lifted her gently off.

She blushed like the western sky, but he was so grave and apparently solicitous, and his words had made his course seem so essential, that she could not take offence. Indeed, he was now giving his whole attention to the broken girth, and she could only await the result of his examination.



"HE NEVER FORGOT THE PICTURE SHE MADE UNDER THE RUSTIC ARCHWAY."

"I think I can mend it with a strap from my bridle so that it will hold until you reach home," he said; "but I am sorry to say that I cannot make it very secure. Will you hold your horse a moment?"

"I am indebted to Mr. Clifford, I think," she began, hesitatingly.

"I am Mr. Clifford, and, believe me, I am wholly at your service. If you had not been so good a horsewoman you might have met with a very serious accident."

"More thanks are due to you, I imagine," she replied; "though I suppose I could have got off in some way."

"There would have been no trouble in your getting off," he said, with one of his frank, contagious smiles; "but then your horse might have run away, or you would have had to lead him some distance, at least. Perhaps it was well that the girth gave way when it did, for it would have broken in a few moments more, in any event. Therefore I hope you will tolerate one not wholly unknown to you, and permit me to be of service."

"Indeed, I have only cause for thanks. I have interfered with your ride, and am putting you to trouble."

"I was only riding for pleasure, and as yet you have had all the trouble."

She did not look excessively annoyed, and in truth was enjoying the adventure quite as much as he was, but she only said: "You have the finest horse there I ever saw. How I should like to ride him!"

"I fear he would be ungallant. He has never been ridden by a lady."

"I should not be afraid so long as the saddle remained firm. What do you call him?"

"Thunder." At the sound of his name the beautiful animal arched his neck and whinnied. "There, be quiet, old fellow, and speak when you are spoken to," Burt said. "He is comparatively gentle with me, but uncontrollable by others. I have now done my best, Miss Hargrove, and I think you may mount in safety, if you are willing to walk your horse quietly home. But I truly think I ought to accompany you, and I will do so gladly, with your permission."

"But it seems asking a great deal of—"

"Of a stranger? I wish I knew how to bring about a formal introduction. I have met your father. Will you not in the emergency defer the introduction until we arrive at your home?"

"I think we may as well dispense with it altogether," she said, laughing. "It would be too hollow a formality after the hour we must spend together, since you think so slow a pace is essential to safety. Events, not we, are to blame for all failures in etiquette."

"I was coming to call upon you this very week with the ladies of our house," he began.

"Indeed!" she said, lifting her eyebrows.

"I assure you of the truth of what I say," he continued, earnestly, turning his handsome eyes to hers. Then throwing his head back a little proudly, he added, "Miss Hargrove, you must know that we are farmers, and midsummer brings the harvest and unwonted labors."

With a slight, piquant imitation of his manner, she said: "My father, you must know, Mr. Clifford, is a merchant. Is not that an equally respectable calling?"

"Some people regard it as far more so."

"Some people are very silly. There is no higher rank than that of a gentleman, Mr. Clifford."

He took off his hat, and said, laughingly: "I hope it is not presumption to imagine a slight personal bearing in your remark. At least, let me prove that I have some claim to the title by seeing you safely home. Will you mount? Put your foot in my hand, and bear your whole weight upon it, and none upon the saddle."

"You don't know how heavy I am."

"No, but I know I can lift you. Try."

Without the least effort she found herself in the saddle. "How strong you are!" she said.

"Yes," he replied, laughing; "I developed my muscle, if not my brains, at college."

In a moment he vaulted lightly upon his horse, that reared proudly, but, at a word from his master, arched his neck and paced as quietly as Miss Hargrove's better-trained animal. Burt's laugh would have thawed Mrs. Grundy's very self. He was so vital with youth and vigor, and his flow of spirits so irresistible, that Miss Hargrove found her own nerves tingling with pleasure. The episode was novel, unexpected, and promised so much for the future, that in her delightful excitement she cast conventionality to the winds, and yielded to his sportive mood. They had not gone a mile together before one would have thought they had been acquainted for years. Burt's frank face was like the open page of a book, and the experienced society girl saw nothing in it but abounding good-nature, and an enjoyment as genuine as her own. She was on the alert for traces of provincialism and rusticity, but was agreeably disappointed at their absence. He certainly was unmarked, and, to her taste, unmarred, by the artificial mode of the day, but there was nothing under-bred in his manner or language. He rather fulfilled her ideal of the light-hearted student who had brought away the air of the university without being oppressed by its learning. She saw, with a curious little blending of pique and pleasure, that he was not in the least afraid of her, and that, while claiming to be simply a farmer, he unconsciously asserted by every word and glance that he was her equal. She had the penetration to recognize from the start that she could not patronize him in the slightest degree, that he was as high-spirited as he was frank and easy in manner, and she could well imagine that his mirthful eyes would flash with anger on slight provocation. She had never met just such a type before, and every moment found her more and more interested and amused.

It must be admitted that his sensations kept pace with hers. Many had found Miss Hargrove's eyes singularly effective under ordinary circumstances, but now her mood gave them an unwonted lustre and power. Her color was high, her talk animated and piquant. Even an enemy, had she had one, would have been forced to admit that she was dazzlingly beautiful, and inflammable Burt could not be indifferent to her charms. He knew that he was not, but complacently assured himself that he was a good judge in such matters.

Mr. Hargrove met them at the door, and his daughter laughingly told him of her mishap. She evidently reposed in him the utmost confidence. He justified it by meeting her in like spirit with her own, and he interpreted her unspoken wishes by so cordially pressing Burt to remain to dinner that he was almost constrained to yield. "You will be too late for your own evening meal," he said, "and your kindness to my daughter would be ill-requited, and our reputation for hospitality would suffer, should we let you depart without taking salt with us. After all, Mr. Clifford, we are neighbors. Why should there be any formality?"

Burt was the last one to have any scruples on such grounds, and he resolved to have his "lark" out, as he mentally characterized it. Mr. Hargrove had been something of a sportsman in his earlier days, and the young fellow's talk was as interesting to him as it had been to Miss Gertrude. Fred, her younger brother, was quite captivated, and elegant Mrs. Hargrove, like her daughter, watched in vain for mannerisms to criticise in the breezy youth. The evening was half gone before Burt galloped homeward, smiling broadly to himself at the adventure.

His absence had caused little remark in the family. It had been taken for granted that he was at Dr. Marvin's or the parsonage, for the young fellow was a great favorite with their pastor. When he entered the sitting-room, however, there was a suppressed excitement in his manner which suggested an unusual experience. He was not slow in relating all that had happened, for the thought had occurred to him that it might be good policy to awaken a little jealousy in Amy. In this effort he was obliged to admit to himself that he failed signally. Even Webb's searching eyes could not detect a trace of chagrin. She only seemed very much amused, and was laughingly profuse in her congratulations to Burt. Moreover, she was genuinely interested in Miss Hargrove, and eager to make her acquaintance. "If she is as nice as you say, Burt," she concluded, "she would make a pleasant addition to our little excursions and pleasure parties. Perhaps she's old and bright enough to talk to Webb, and draw him out of his learned preoccupation," she added, with a shy glance towards the one who was growing too remote from her daily life.

Even his bronzed face flushed, but he said, with a laugh: "She is evidently much too bright for me, and would soon regard me as insufferably stupid. I have never found much favor with city dames, or with dames of any description, for that matter."

"So much the worse for the dames, then," she replied, with a piquant nod at him.

"Little sisters are apt to be partial judges — at least, one is," he said, smilingly, as he left the room. He walked out in the moonlight, thinking: "There was not a trace of jealousy in her face. Well, why should there be? Burt's perfect frankness was enough to prevent anything of the kind. If there had been cause for jealousy, he would have been reticent. Besides, Amy is too high-toned to yield readily to this vice, and Burt can never be such an idiot as to endanger his prospects."

A scheme, however, was maturing in Burt's busy brain that night, which he thought would be a master-stroke of policy. He was quite aware of the good impression that he had made on Miss Hargrove, and he determined that Amy's wishes should be carried out in a sufficient degree at least to prove to her that a city belle would not be wholly indifferent to his attentions. "I'll teach the coy little beauty that others are not so blind as she is, and I imagine that, with Miss Hargrove's aid, I can disturb her serenity a little before many weeks pass."

CHAPTER XL.

MISS HARGROVE.

BUT a few days elapsed before Mr. Clifford, with Burt, Maggie, and Amy, made the call which would naturally inaugurate an exchange of social visits. Mr. Hargrove was especially interested in the old gentleman, and they were at once deep in rural affairs. Maggie was a little reserved at first with Mrs. Hargrove, but the latter, with all her stateliness, was a zealous housekeeper, and so the two ladies were soon *en rapport.*

The young people adjourned to the piazza, and their merry laughter and animated talk proved that if there had been any constraint it was vanishing rapidly. Amy was naturally a little shy at first, but Miss Hargrove had the tact to put her guests immediately at ease. She proposed to have a good time during the remainder of the summer, and saw in Burt a means to that end, while she instinctively felt that she must propitiate Amy in order to accomplish her purpose. Therefore she was disposed to pay a little court to her on general principles. She had learned that the young girl was a ward of Mr. Clifford's. What Burt was to Amy she did not know, but was sure she could soon find out, and his manner had led to the belief that he was not a committed and acknowledged lover. She made no discoveries, however, for he was not one to display a real preference in public, and indeed, in accordance with his scheme, she received his most marked attentions. Amy also both baffled and interested her. She could not immediately accept of this genuine child of nature, whose very simplicity was puzzling. It might be the perfection of well-bred reserve, such complete art as to appear artless. Miss Margrove had been in society too long to take anything impulsively on trust. Still, she was charmed with the young girl, and Amy was also genuinely pleased with her new acquaintance. Before they parted a horseback ride was arranged, at Burt's suggestion, for the next afternoon. This was followed by visits that soon lost all formality, boating on the river, other rides, drives, and excursions to points of interest throughout the region. Webb was occasionally led to participate in these, but he usually had some excuse for remaining at home. He, also, was a new type to Miss Hargrove, "indigenous to the soil," she smilingly said to herself, "and a fine growth too. With his grave face and ways he makes a splendid contrast to his brother." She found him too reticent for good-fellowship, and he gave her the impression also that he knew too much about that which was remote from her life and interests. At the same time, with her riper experience, she speedily divined his secret, to which Amy was blind. "He could almost say his prayers to Amy," she thought, as she returned after an evening spent at the Cliffords', "and she doesn't know it."

With all his frankness, Burt's relations to Amy still baffled her. She sometimes thought she saw his eyes following the young girl with lover-like fondness, and she also thought that he was a little more pronounced in his attentions to her in Amy's absence. Acquaintanceship ripened into intimacy as plants matured under the waning suns of July, and the girls often spent the night together. Amy was soon beguiled into giving her brief, simple history, omitting, of course, all reference to Burt's passionate declaration and his subsequent expectations. As far as she herself was concerned, she had no experiences of this character to relate, and her nature was much too fine to gossip about Burt. Miss Hargrove soon accepted Amy's perfect simplicity as a charming fact, and while the young girl had all the refinement and intelligence of her city friend, the absence of certain phases of experience made her companionship all the more fascinating and refreshing. It was seen that she had grown thus far in secluded and sheltered nooks, and the ignorance that resulted was like morning dew upon a flower. Of one thing her friend thought herself assured — Burt had never touched Amy's heart, and she was as unconscious of herself as of Webb's well-hidden devotion. The Clifford family interested Miss Gertrude exceedingly, and her innate goodness of heart was proved by the fact that she soon became a favorite with Mr. and Mrs. Clifford. She never came to the house without bringing flowers to the latter — not only beautiful exotics from the florists, but wreaths of clematis, bunches of meadow-rue from her rambles, and water-lilies and cardinal-flowers from boating excursions up the Moodna Creek — and the secluded invalid enjoyed her brilliant beauty and piquant ways as if she had been a rare flower herself.

Burt had entered on his scheme with the deepest interest and with confident expectations. As time passed, however, he found that he could not pique Amy in the slightest degree; that she rather regarded his interest in Miss Hargrove as the most natural thing in the world, because she was so interesting. Therefore he at last just let himself drift, and was content with the fact that the summer was passing delightfully. That Miss Hargrove's dark eyes sometimes quickened his pulse strangely did not trouble him; it had often been quickened before. When they were alone, and she sang to him in her rich contralto, and he, at her request, added his musical tenor, it seemed perfectly natural that he should bend over her towards the notes in a way that was not the result of near-sightedness. Burt was amenable to other attractions than that of gravitation.

Webb was the only one not blind to the drift of events. While he forbore by word or sign to interfere, he felt that new elements were entering into the problem of the future. He drove the farm and garden work along with a tireless energy against which even Leonard remonstrated. But Webb knew that his most wholesome antidote for suspense and trouble was work, and good for all would come of his remedy. He toiled long hours in the oat harvest. He sowed seed which promised a thousand bushels of turnips. Land foul with weeds, or only half subdued, he sowed with that best of scavenger crops, buckwheat, which was to be ploughed under as soon as in blossom. The vegetable and fruit gardens gave him much occupation, also, and the table fairly groaned under the over-abundant supply, while Abram was almost daily despatched to the landing or to neighboring markets with loads of various produce. The rose garden, however, seemed to afford Webb his chief recreation and a place of rest, and the roses in Amy's belt were the wonder and envy of all who saw them. His mother sometimes looked at him curiously, as he still brought to her the finest specimens, and one day she said: "Webb, I never knew even you to be so tireless before. You are growing very thin, and you are certainly going beyond your strength, and — forgive me — you seem restlessly active. Have you any trouble in which mother can help you?"

"You always help me, mother," he said, gently; "but I have no trouble that requires your or any one's attention. I like to be busy, and there is much to do. I am getting the work well along, so that I can take a trip in August, and not leave too much for Leonard to look after."

August came, and with it the promise of drought, but he and his elder brother had provided against it. The young trees had been well mulched while the ground was moist, and deep, thorough cultivation rendered the crops safe unless the rainless period should be of long duration.

Already in the rustling foliage there were whisperings of autumn. The nights grew longer, and were filled with the sounds of insect life. The robins disappeared from about the house, and were haunting distant groves, becoming as wild as they had formerly been domestic. The season of bird song was over for the year. The orioles whistled in a languid and desultory way occasionally, and the smaller warblers sometimes gave utterance to defective strains, but the leaders of the feathered chorus, the thrushes, were silent. The flower-beds flamed with geraniums and salvias, and were gay with gladioli, while Amy and Mrs. Clifford exulted in the extent and variety of their finely quilled and rose-like asters and dahlias. The foliage of the trees had gained its darkest hues, and the days passed, one so like another that nature seemed to be taking a summer siesta.

CHAPTER XLI.

A FIRE IN THE MOUNTAINS.

A DAY in August can be as depressing as a typical one in May is inspiring, or in June entrancing. As the season advanced Nature appeared to be growing languid and faint. There was neither cloud by day nor dew at night. The sun burned rather than vivified the earth, and the grass and herbage withered and shrivelled before its unobstructed rays. The foliage along the roadsides grew dun-colored from the dust, and those who rode or drove on thoroughfares were stifled by the irritating clouds that rose on the slightest provocation. Pleasure could be found only on the unfrequented lanes that led to the mountains or ran along their bases. Even there trees that drew their sustenance from soil spread thinly on the rocks were seen to be dying, their leaves not flushing with autumnal tints, but hanging limp and bleached, as if they had exhaled their vital juices. The moss beneath them, that had been softer to the tread than a Persian rug, crumbled into powder under the foot. Alf went to gather huckleberries, but, except in moist and swampy places, found them shrivelled on the bushes. Even the corn leaves began to roll on the uplands, and Leonard shook his head despondingly. Webb's anxieties, however, were of a far deeper character, and he was philosophical enough to average the year's income. If the cows did come home hungry from their pasture, there was abundance of hay and green-corn fodder to carry them through until the skies should become more propitious. Besides, there was an unfailing spring upon the place, and from this a large cask on wheels was often filled, and was then drawn by one of the quiet farm-horses to the best of the flower beds, the young trees, and to such products of the garden as would repay for the expenditure of time and labor. The ground was never sprinkled so that the morning sun of the following day would drink up the moisture, but so deluged that the watering would answer for several days. It was well known that partial watering does only harm. Nature can be greatly assisted at such times, but it must be in accordance with her laws. The grapevine is a plant that can endure an unusual degree of drought, and the fruit will be all the earlier and sweeter for it. An excellent fertilizer for the grape is suds from the laundry, and by filling a wide, shallow basin, hollowed out from the earth around the stems, with this alkaline infusion, the vines were kept in the best condition. The clusters of the earlier varieties were already beginning to color, and the season insured the perfect ripening of those fine old kinds, the Isabella and Catawba, that too often are frost-bitten before they become fit for the table.

Thus it would appear that Nature has compensations for her worst moods — greater compensations than are thought of by many. Drought causes the roots of plants and trees to strike deep, and so extends the range of their feeding-ground, and anchors vegetation of all kinds more firmly in the soil.

Nevertheless, a long dry period is always depressing. The bright green fades out of the landscape, the lawns and grass-plots become brown and sear, the air loses its sweet, refreshing vitality, and is often so charged with smoke from forest-fires, and impalpable dust, that respiration is not agreeable. Apart from considerations of profit and loss, the sympathy of the Clifford household was too deep with Nature to permit the indifference of those whose garden is the market stall and the florist's greenhouse, and to whom vistas in hotel parlors and piazzas are the most attractive.

"It seems to me," Leonard remarked at the dinner-table one day, "that droughts are steadily growing more serious and frequent."

"They are," replied his father. "While I remember a few in early life that were more prolonged than any we have had of late years, they must have resulted from exceptional causes, for we usually had an abundance of rain, and did not suffer as we do now from violent alternations of weather. There was one year when there was scarcely a drop of rain throughout the summer. Potatoes planted in the late spring were found in the autumn dry and unsprouted. But such seasons were exceedingly rare, and now droughts are the rule."

"And the people are chiefly to blame for them," said Webb. "We are suffering from the law of heredity. Our forefathers were compelled to fell the trees to make room for the plough, and now one of the strongest impulses of the average American is to cut down a tree. Our forests, on which a moist climate so largely depends, are treated as if they encumbered the ground. The smoke that we are breathing proves that fires are ravaging to the north and west of us. They should be permitted no more than a fire in the heart of a city. The future of the country depends upon the people becoming sane on this subject. If we will send to the Legislature pot-house politicians who are chiefly interested in keeping up a supply of liquor instead of water, they should be provided with a little primer giving the condition of lands denuded of their forests. There is scarcely anything in their shifty ways, their blind zeal for what the 'deestrict' wants to-day, regardless of coming days, that so irritates me as their stupidity on this subject. A man who votes against the protection of our forests is not fit for the office of road-master. After all, the people are to blame, and their children will pay dear for their ignorance and the spirit which finds expression in the saying, 'After me the deluge;' and there will be flood and drought until every foot of land not adapted to cultivation and pasturage is again covered with trees. Indeed, a great deal of good land should be given up to forests, for then what was cultivated would produce far more than could be obtained from a treeless and therefore rainless country."

"Bravo, Webb!" cried Burt; "we must send you to the Legislature."

"How is the evil to be prevented?" Leonard asked.

A PASTORAL.

"Primarily by instruction and the formation of public opinion. The influence of trees on the climate should be taught in all our schools as thoroughly as the multiplication-table. The national and state governments would then be compelled to look beyond the next election, and to appoint foresters who would have the same power to call out the people to extinguish a forest fire that the sheriff has to collect his posse to put down mob violence. In the long-run fire departments in our forest tracts would be more useful than the same in cities, for, after all, cities depend upon the country and its productiveness. The owners of woodland should be taught the folly of cutting everything before them, and of leaving the refuse brush to become like tinder. The smaller growth should be left to mature, and the brush piled and burned in a way that would not involve the destruction of every sprout and sapling over wide areas. As it is, we are at the mercy of every careless boy, and such vagrants as Lumley used to be before Amy woke him up. It is said — and with truth at times, I fear — that the shiftless mountaineers occasionally start the fires, for a fire means brief high-priced labor for them, and afterwards an abundance of whiskey."

Events furnished a practical commentary on Webb's words. Miss Hargrove had come over to spend the night with Amy, and to try some fine old English glees that she had obtained from her city home. They had just adjourned from the supper-table to the piazza when Lumley appeared, hat in hand. He spoke to Leonard, but looked at Amy with a kind of wondering admiration, as if he could not believe that the girl, who looked so fair and delicate in her evening dress, so remote from him and his surroundings, could ever have given him her hand, and spoken as if their humanity had anything in common.

The Cliffords were informed that a fire had broken out on a tract adjoining their own. "City chaps was up there gunning out o' season," Lumley explained, "and wads from their guns must 'a started it."

As there was much wood ranked on the Clifford tract, the matter was serious. Abram and other farm-hands were summoned, and the brothers acted as did the minute-men in the Revolution when the enemy appeared in their vicinity. The young men excused themselves, and bustle and confusion followed. Burt, with a flannel blouse belted tightly around his waist, soon dashed up to the front piazza on his horse, and, flourishing a rake, said, laughingly, " I don't look much like a knight sallying forth to battle — do I ? "

" You look as if you could be one if the occasion arose," Miss Hargrove replied.

During the half-jesting badinage that followed Amy stole away. Behind the house Webb was preparing to mount, when a light hand fell on his shoulder. " You will be careful ? " said Amy, appealingly. " You don't seem to spare yourself in anything. I dread to have you go up into those darkening mountains."

" Why, Amy," he replied, laughing, " one would think I was going to fight Indians, and you feared for my scalp."

" I am not so young and blind but that I can see that you are quietly half reckless with yourself," she replied ; and her tone indicated that she was a little hurt.

" I pledge you my word that I will not be reckless to-night ; and, after all, this is but disagreeable, humdrum work that we often have to do. Don't worry, little sister. Burt will be there to watch over me, you know," he added. " By the way, where is he ? It's time we were off."

" Oh, he's talking romantic nonsense to Miss Hargrove. He won't hurt himself. I wish I was as sure of you, and I wish I had more influence over you. I'm not such a very little sister, even if I don't know enough to talk to you as you would like ;" and she left him abruptly.

He mastered a powerful impulse to spring from his horse and call her back. A moment's thought taught him, however, that he could not trust himself then to say a word, and he rode rapidly away.

" I must be misunderstood," he muttered. " That is the best chance for us both, unless — " But he hesitated to put into words the half-formed hope that Miss Hargrove's appearance in the little drama of their lives might change its final scenes. " She's jealous of her friend, at last," he concluded, and this conviction gave him little comfort. Burt soon overtook him, and their ride was comparatively silent, for each was busy with his own thoughts. Lumley was directed to join them at the fire, and then was forgotten by all except Amy, who, by a gentle urgency, induced him to go to the kitchen and get a good supper. Before he departed she slipped a bank-note into his hand with which to buy a dress for the baby. Lumley had to pass more than one groggery on his way to the mountains, but the money was as safe in his pocket as it would have been in Amy's.

"I swow! I could say my prayers to her!" he soliloquized, as he hastened through the gathering darkness with his long, swinging stride. "I didn't know there was sich gells. She's never lectured me once, but she jest smiles and looks a feller into bein' a man."

Miss Hargrove had noted Amy's influence over the mountaineer, and she asked for an explanation. Amy, in a very brief, modest way, told of her visits to the wretched cabin, and said, in conclusion: "I feel sorry for poor Lumley. The fact that he is trying to do better, with so much against him, proves what he might have been. That's one of the things that trouble me most, as I begin to think and see a little of life: so many people have no chance worth speaking of."

"The thing that ought to trouble me most is, I suppose, that those who have a chance do so little for such people. Amy," she added, sadly, after a moment's thought, "I've had many triumphs over men, but none like yours; and I feel to-night as if I could give them all to see a man look at me as that poor fellow looked at you. It was the grateful homage of a human soul to whom you had given something that in a dim way was felt to be priceless. The best that I can remember in my pleasure-loving life is that I have not permitted myself selfishly and recklessly to destroy manhood, but I fear no one is the better for having known me."

"You do yourself injustice," said Amy, warmly. "I'm the better and happier for having known you. Papa had a morbid horror of fashionable society, and this accounts for my being so unsophisticated. With all your experience of such society, I have perfect faith in you, and could trust you implicitly."

"Have you truly faith in me?" (and Amy thought she had never seen such depth and power in human eyes as in those of Miss Hargrove, who encircled the young girl with her arm, and looked as if seeking to detect the faintest doubt).

"Yes," said Amy, with quiet emphasis.

Miss Hargrove drew a long breath, and then said: "That little word may do me more good than all the sermons I ever heard. Many would try to be different if others had more faith in them. I think that is the secret of your power over the rough man that has just gone. You recognized the good that was in him, and made him conscious of it. Well, I must try to deserve your trust." Then she stepped out on the dusky piazza, and sighed, as she thought: "It may cost me dear. She seemed troubled at my words to Burt, and stole away as if she were the awkward third person. I may have misjudged her, and she cares for him after all."

Amy went to the piano, and played softly until summoned without by an excited exclamation from her friend. A line of fire was creeping towards them around a lofty highland, and it grew each moment more and more distinct. "Oh, I know from its position that it's drawing near our tract," cried Amy. "If it is so bright to us at this distance, it must be almost terrible to those near by. I suppose they are all up there just in front of it, and Burt is so reckless." She was about to say Webb, but, because of some unrecognized impulse, she did not. The utterance of Burt's name, however, was not lost on Miss Hargrove.

For a long time the girls watched the scene with awe, and each, in imagination, saw an athletic figure begrimed with smoke, and sending out grotesque shadows into the obscurity, as the destroying element was met and fought in ways unknown to them, which, they felt sure, involved danger. Miss Hargrove feared that they both had the same form in mind. She was not a girl to remain long unconscious of her heart's inclinations, and she knew that Burt Clifford had quickened her pulses as no man had ever done before. This very fact made her less judicial, less keen, in her insight. If he was so attractive to her, could Amy be indifferent to him after months of companionship? She had thought that she understood Amy thoroughly, but was beginning to lose faith in her impression. While in some respects Amy was still a child, there were quiet depths in her nature of which the young girl herself was but half conscious. She often lapsed into long reveries. Webb's course troubled her. Never had he been more fraternal in his manner, but apparently she was losing her power to interest him, to lure him away from the material side of life. "I can't keep pace with him," she sighed; "and now that he has learned all about my little range of thoughts and knowledge, he finds that I can be scarcely more to him than Johnnie, whom he pets in much the same spirit that he does me, and then goes to his work or books and forgets us both. He could help me so much, if he only thought it worth his while! I'm sure I'm not contented to be ignorant, and many of the things that he knows so much about interest me most."

Thus each girl was busy with her thoughts, as they sat in the warm summer night and watched the vivid line draw nearer. Mr. Clifford and Maggie came out from time to time, and were evidently disturbed by the unchecked progress of the fire. Alf had gone with his father, and anything like a conflagration so terrified Johnnie that she dared not leave her mother's lighted room.

Suddenly the approaching line grew dim, was broken, and before very long even the last red glow disappeared utterly. "Ah," said Mr. Clifford, rubbing his hands, "they have got the fire under, and I don't believe it reached our tract."

"How did they put it out so suddenly?" Miss Hargrove asked. "Were they not fighting it all the time?"

"The boys will soon be here, and they can give you a more graphic account than I. Mother is a little excited and troubled, as she always is when her great babies are away on such affairs, so I must ask you to excuse me."

In little more than half an hour a swift gallop was heard, and Burt soon appeared, in the light of the late-rising moon. "It's all out," he exclaimed. "Leonard and Webb propose remaining an hour or two longer, to see that it does not break out again. There's no need of their doing so, for Lumley promised to watch till morning. I'm not fit to be seen. If you'll wait till I put on a little of the aspect of a white man, I'll join you." He had been conscious of a feverish impatience to get back to the ladies, having carefully, even in his thoughts, employed the plural, and he had feared that they might have retired.

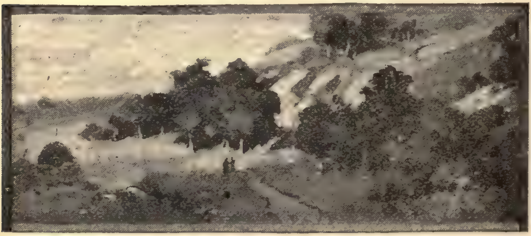
Miss Hargrove exclaimed: "How absurd! You wish to go and divest yourself of all picturesqueness! I've seen well-dressed men before, and would much prefer that you should join us as you are. We can then imagine that you are a bandit or a frontiersman, and that your rake was a rifle, which you had used against the Indians. We are impatient to have you tell us how you fought the fire."

He gave but scant attention to Thunder that night, and soon stepped out on the moonlit piazza, his tall, fine figure outlined to perfection in his close-fitting costume.

"You will, indeed, need all your imagination to make anything of our task to-night," he said. "Fighting a mountain fire is the most prosaic of hard work. Suppose the line of fire coming down towards me from where you are sitting." As yet unknown to him, a certain subtile flame was originating in that direction. "We simply begin well in advance of it, so that we may have time to rake a space, extending along the whole front of the fire, clear of leaves and rubbish, and as far as possible to hollow out with hoes a trench through this space. Thus, when the fire comes to this cleared area, there is nothing to burn, and it goes out for want of fuel. Of course, it's rough work, and it must be done rapidly, but you can see that all the heroic elements which you may have associated with our expedition are utterly lacking."

"Well, no matter. Amy and I have had our little romance, and have imagined you charging the line of fire in imminent danger of being strangled with smoke, if nothing worse."

Amy soon heard Maggie bustling about, preparing a midnight lunch for those who would come home hungry as well as weary, and she said that she would go and try to help. To Burt this seemed sufficient reason for her absence, but Miss Hargrove thought, "Perhaps she saw that his eyes were fixed chiefly on me as he gave his description. I wish I knew just how she feels towards him!"



AN UPLAND LEDGE.

But the temptation to remain in the witching moonlight was too strong to be resisted. His mellow tones were a music that she had never heard before, and her eyes grew lustrous with suppressed feeling, and a happiness to which she was not sure she was entitled. The spell of her beauty was on him also, and the moments flew by unheeded, until Amy was heard playing and singing softly to herself. "She does not join us again!" was Miss Hargrove's mental comment, and with not a little compunction she rose and went into the parlor. Burt lighted a cigar, in the hope that the girls would again join him, but Leonard, Webb, and Alf returned sooner than they were expected, and all speedily sat down to their unseasonable repast. To Amy's surprise, Webb was the liveliest of the party, but he looked gaunt from fatigue — so worn, indeed, that he reminded her of the time when he had returned from Burt's rescue. But there was no such episode as had then occurred before they parted for the night, and to this she now looked back wistfully. He rose before the others, pleaded fatigue, and went to his room.

CHAPTER XLII.

CAMPING OUT.

THEY all gathered at a late breakfast, and the surface current of family and social life sparkled as if there were no hidden depths and secret thoughts. Amy's manner was not cold towards Webb, but her pride was touched, and her feelings were a little hurt. While disposed to blame herself only that she had not the power to interest him and secure his companionship, as in the past, it was not in human nature to receive with indifference such an apparent hint that he was far beyond her. "It would be more generous in Webb to help than to ignore me because I know so little," she thought. "Very well: I can have a good time with Burt and Gertrude until Webb gets over his hurry and pre-occupation;" and with a slight spirit of retaliation she acted as if she thoroughly enjoyed Burt's lively talk.

The young fellow soon made a proposition that caused a general and breezy excitement. "There never was a better time than this for camping out," he said. "The ground is dry, and there is scarcely any dew. I can get two large wall tents. Suppose we go up and spend a few days on our mountain tract? Maggie could chaperon the party, and I've no doubt that Dr. and Mrs. Marvin would join us."

The discussion of the project grew lively. Maggie was inclined to demur. How could she leave the old people and her housekeeping? Mr. and Mrs. Clifford, however, became the strongest advocates of the scheme. They could get along with the servants, they said, and a little outing would do Maggie good. Leonard, who had listened in comparative silence, brought his wife to a decision by saying: "You had better go, Maggie. You will have all the housekeeping you want on the mountain, and I will go back and forth every day and see that all's right. It's not as if you were beyond the reach of home, for you could be here in an hour were there need. Come now, make up your mind for a regular lark. It will do you good."

The children were wild with delight at the prospect, and Miss Hargrove and Amy scarcely less pleased. The latter had furtively watched Webb, who at first could not disguise a little perplexity and trouble at the prospect. But he had thought rapidly, and felt that a refusal to be one of the party might cause embarrassing surmises. Therefore he also soon became zealous in his advocacy of the plan. He felt that circumstances were changing and controlling his action. He had fully resolved on an absence of some weeks, but the prolonged drought and the danger it involved — the Cliffords would lose at least a thousand dollars should a fire sweep over their mountain tract — made it seem wrong for him to leave home until rain insured safety. Moreover, he believed that he detected symptoms in Burt which, with his knowledge of his brother, led to hopes that he could not banish. An occasional expression in Miss Hargrove's dark eyes, also, did not tend to lessen these hopes. "The lack of conventionality incident to a mountain camp," he thought, "may develop matters so rapidly as to remove my suspense. With all Amy's gentleness, she is very sensitive and proud, and Burt cannot go much farther with Miss Hargrove without so awakening her pride as to render futile all efforts to retrieve himself. After all, Miss Hargrove, perhaps, would suit him far better than Amy. They are both fond of excitement and society. Why can't we all be happy? At least, if the way were clear, I would try as no man ever tried to win Amy, and I should be no worse off than I am if I failed in the attempt."

These musings were rather remote from his practical words, for he had taken pains to give the impression that their woodland would be far safer for the proposed expedition, and Amy had said, a little satirically, "We are now sure of Webb, since he can combine so much business with pleasure."

He only smiled back in an inscrutable way.

Musk-melons formed one of their breakfast dishes, and Miss Hargrove remarked, "Papa has been exceedingly annoyed by having some of his finest ones stolen."

Burt began laughing, and said: "He should imitate my tactics. Ours were stolen last year, and as they approached maturity, some time since, I put up a notice in large black letters, 'Thieves, take warning: be careful not to steal the poisoned melons.' Hearing a dog bark one night about a week ago, I took a revolver and went out. The moonlight was clear, and there, reading the notice, was a group of ragamuffin boys. Stealing up near them, behind some shrubbery, I fired my pistol in the air, and they fairly tumbled over each other in their haste to escape. We've had no trouble since, I can assure you. I'll drive you home this morning, and, with your father's permission, will put up a similar notice in your garden. We also must make our arrangements for camping promptly. This weather can't last much longer. It surely will not if our mountain experience makes us wish it would;" and, full of his projects, he hastened to harness Thunder to his light top-wagon.

He might have taken the two-seated carriage, and asked Amy to accompany them, but it had not occurred to him to do so, especially as he intended to drive on rapidly to Newburgh to make arrangements for the tents. She felt a little slighted and neglected, and Miss Hargrove saw that she did, but thought that any suggestion of a different arrangement might lead to embarrassment. She began to think, with Webb, that the camping experience would make everything clearer. At any rate, it promised so much unhackneyed pleasure that she resolved to make the most of it, and then decide upon her course. She was politic, and cautioned Burt to say nothing until she had first seen her father, for she was not certain how her stately and conventional mother would regard the affair. She pounced upon Mr. Hargrove in his library, and he knew from her preliminary caresses that some unusual favor was to be asked.

"Come," he said, "you wily little strategist, what do you want now? Half of my kingdom?"

She explained rather incoherently.

His answer was unexpected, for he asked, "Is Mr. Burt Clifford in the parlor?"

"No," she replied, faintly; "he's on the piazza." Then, with unusual animation, she began about the melons. Her father's face softened, and he looked at her a little humorously, for her flushed, handsome face would disarm a Puritan.

"You are seeing a great deal of this young Mr. Clifford," he said.

Her color deepened, and she began, hastily, "Oh, well, papa, I've seen a good deal of a great many gentlemen."

"Come, come, Trurie, no disguises with me. Your old father is not so blind as you think, and I've not lived to my time of life in ignorance of the truth that prevention is better than cure. Whether you are aware of it or not, your eyes have revealed to me a growing interest in Mr. Clifford."

She hid her face upon his shoulder.

"He is a comparatively poor man, I suppose, and while I think him a fine fellow, I've seen in him no great aptness for business. If I saw that he was no more to you than others who have sought your favor, I would not say a word, Trurie, for when you are indifferent you are abundantly able to take care of yourself. I've been expecting this. I knew you would in time meet some one who would have the power to do more than amuse you, and my love, darling, is too deep and vigilant to be blind until it is too late to see. You are merely interested in Mr. Clifford now. You might become more than interested during an experience like the one proposed."

"If I should, papa, am I so poor that I have not even the privilege of a village girl, who can follow her heart?"

"My advice would be," he replied, gently, "that you guide yourself by both reason and your heart. This is our secret council-chamber, and one is speaking to you who has no thought but for your lasting happiness."

She took a chair near him, and looked into his eyes, as she said, thoughtfully and gravely: "I should be both silly and unnatural, did I not recognize your motive and love. I know I am not a child any longer, and should have no excuse for any school-girl or romantic folly. You have always had my confidence; you would have had it in this case as soon as there was anything to tell. I scarcely understand myself as yet, but must admit that I am more interested in Mr. Clifford than in any man I ever met, and, as you said, I also have not reached my time of life without knowing what this may lead to. You married mamma when she was younger than I, and you, too, papa, were 'a comparatively poor man' at the time. I have thought a great deal about it. I know all that wealth and fashionable society can give me, and I tell you honestly, papa, I would rather be the happy wife that Maggie Clifford is than marry any millionaire in New York. There is no need, however, for such serious talk, for there is nothing yet beyond congenial companionship, and — Well," she added, hastily, in memory of Amy, "I don't believe anything will come of it. But I want to go on this expedition. There will probably be two married ladies in the party, and so I don't see that even mamma can object. Rest assured I shall never become engaged to any one without your consent; that is," she added, with another of her irresistible caresses, "unless you are very unreasonable, and I become very old."

"Very well, Trurie, you shall go, with your mother's consent, and I think I can insure that. As you say, you are no longer a child." And his thought was, "I have seen enough of life to know that it is best not to be too arbitrary in such matters."

After a moment he added, gravely, "You say you have thought. Think a great deal more before you take any steps which may involve all your future."

Burt was growing uneasy on the piazza, and feared that Miss Hargrove might not obtain the consent that she had counted on so confidently. He was a little surprised, also, to find how the glamour faded out of his anticipations at the thought of her absence, but explained his feeling by saying to himself, "She is so bright and full of life, and has so fine a voice, that we should miss her sadly." He was greatly relieved, therefore, when Mr. Hargrove came out and greeted him courteously. Gertrude had been rendered too conscious, by her recent interview, to accompany her father, but she soon appeared, and no one could have imagined that Burt was more to her than an agreeable acquaintance. Mrs. Hargrove gave a reluctant consent, and it was soon settled that they should try to get off on the afternoon of the following day. Burt also included in the invitation young Fred Hargrove, and then drove away elated.

At the dinner-table he announced his success in procuring the tents, and his intention of going for them in the afternoon. At the same time he exhorted Leonard and Maggie to prepare provisions adequate to mountain appetites, adding, "Webb, I suppose, will be too busy to do more than join us at the last moment."

Webb said nothing, but disappeared after dinner. As he was at supper as usual, no questions were asked. Before it was light the next morning Amy thought she heard steps on the stairs, and the rear hall-door shut softly. When finally awaking, she was not sure but that her impression was a dream. As she came down to breakfast Burt greeted her with dismay.

"The tents, that I put on the back piazza, are gone," he said.

"Where is Webb?" was her quick response.

No one had seen him, and it was soon learned that a horse and a strong wagon were also missing.

"Ah, Burt," cried Amy, laughing, "rest assured Webb has stolen a march on you, and taken his own way of retaliation for what you said at the dinner-table yesterday. He was away all the afternoon, too. I believe he has chosen a camping-ground, and the tents are standing on it."

"He should have remembered that others might have some choice in the matter," was the discontented reply.

"If Webb has chosen the camping-ground, you will all be pleased with it," said his mother, quietly. "I think he is merely trying to give a pleasant surprise."

He soon appeared, and explained that, with Lumley's help, he had made some preparations, since any suitable place, with water near, from which there was a fine outlook, would have seemed very rough and uninviting to the ladies unless more work was done than could be accomplished in the afternoon of their arrival.

"Now I think that is very thoughtful of you, Webb," said Amy. "The steps I heard last night were not a dream. At what unearthly hour did you start?"

"Was I so heavy-footed as to disturb you?"

"Oh, no, Webb," she said, with a look of comic distress, in which there was also a little reproach; "it's not your feet that disturb me, but your head. You have stuffed it so full of learning that I am depressed by the emptiness of mine."

He laughed, as he replied, "I hope all your troubles may be quite as imaginary." Then he told Leonard to spend the morning in helping Maggie, who would know best what was needed for even mountain housekeeping, and said that he would see to farm matters, and join them early in the evening. The peaches were ripening, and Amy, from her window, saw that he was taking from the trees all fit for market; also that Abram, under his direction, was busy with the watering-cart. "Words cannot impose upon me," she thought, a little bitterly. "He knows how I long for his companionship, and it's not a little thing to be made to feel that I am scarcely better qualified for it than Johnnie."

Burt galloped over to Dr. Marvin's, who promised to join them, with his wife, on the following day. He had a tent which he had occasionally used in his ornithological pursuits.

At two in the afternoon a merry party started for the hills. All the vehicles on the farm had been impressed into the service to bring up the party, with chairs, cooking-utensils, provisions, bedding, etc. When they reached the ground that Webb had selected, even Burt admitted his pleased surprise. The outlook over the distant river, and a wide area of country dotted with villages, was superb, while to the camp a home-like look had already been given, and the ladies, with many mental encomiums, saw how secluded and inviting an aspect had been imparted to their especial abode. As they came on the scene, Lumley was finishing the construction of a dense screen of evergreen boughs, which surrounded the canvas to the doorway. Not far away an iron pot was slung on a cross-stick in gypsy style, and it was flanked by rock-work fireplaces which Maggie declared were almost equal to a kitchen range. The men's tent was pitched at easy calling distance, and, like that of the ladies, was surrounded by a thick growth of trees, whose shade would be grateful. A little space had been cleared between the two tents for a leaf-canopied dining-hall, and a table of boards improvised. The ground, as far as possible, had been cleared of loose stones and rubbish. Around the fireplace mossy rocks abounded, and were well adapted for picturesque groupings. What touched Amy most was a little flower-bed made of the rich black mould of decayed leaves, in which were some of her favorite flowers, well watered. This did not suggest indifference on the part of Webb. About fifty feet from the tents the mountain shelf sloped off abruptly, and gave the magnificent view that has been mentioned. Even Burt saw how much had been gained by Webb's forethought, and frankly acknowledged it. As it was, they had no more than time to complete the arrangements for the night before the sun's level rays lighted up a scene that was full of joyous activity and bustle. The children's happy voices made the echoes ring, and Fred Hargrove, notwithstanding his city antecedents, yielded with delight to the love of primitive life that exists in every boy's heart. Although he was a few years older than Alf, they had become friendly rivals as incipient sportsmen and naturalists. Amy felt that she was coming close to nature's heart, and the novelty of it all was scarcely less exciting to her than to Johnnie. To little Ned it was a place of wonder and enchantment, and he kept them all in a mild state of terror by his exploring expeditions. At last his father threatened to take him home, and, with this awful punishment before his eyes, he put his thumb in his mouth, perched upon a rock, and philosophically watched the preparations for supper. Maggie was the presiding genius of the occasion, and looked like the light-hearted girl that Leonard had wooed more than a dozen years before. She ordered him around, jested with him, and laughed at him in such a piquant way that Burt declared she was proving herself unfit for the duties of chaperon by getting up a flirtation with her husband. Meanwhile, under her supervision, order was evoked from chaos, and appetizing odors arose from the fireplace.

Miss Hargrove admitted to herself that in all the past she had never known such hours of keen enjoyment, and she was bent on proving that, although a city-bred girl, she could take her part in the work as well as in the fun. Nor were her spirits dampened by the fact that Burt was often at her side, and that Amy did not appear to care. The latter, however, was becoming aware of his deepening interest in her brilliant friend. As yet she was not sure whether it was more than a good-natured and hospitable effort to make one so recently a stranger at home with them, or a new lapse on his part into a condition of ever-enduring love and constancy — and the smile that followed the thought was not flattering to Burt.

A little before supper was ready Maggie asked him to get a pail of water.

"Come, Miss Gertrude," he said, "and I'll show you the

Continental spring at which the Revolutionary soldiers drank more than a hundred years ago;" and she tripped away with him, nothing loath. As they re-appeared, flushed and laughing, carrying the pail between them, Amy trilled out,

"Jack and Jill came up the hill."

A moment later, Webb followed them, on horseback, and was greeted with acclamations and overwhelmed with compliments. Miss Hargrove was only too glad of the diversion from herself, for Amy's words had made her absurdly conscious for a society girl.

They feasted through the long twilight. Never had green corn, roasted in its husks on the coals, tasted so delicious, and never before were peaches and cream so ambrosial. Amy made it her care that poor Lumley should feast also, but the smile with which she served him was the sustenance he most craved. Then, as the evening breeze grew chilly, and the night darkened, lanterns were hung in the trees, the fire was replenished, and they sat down, the merriest of merry parties. Even Webb had vowed that he would ignore the past and the future, and make the most of that camp-fire by the wayside of life. It must be admitted, however, that his discovery of Burt and Miss Hargrove alone at the spring had much to do with his resolution. Stories and songs succeeded each other, until Ned was asleep in Maggie's arms, and Johnnie nodding at her side. In re-action from the excitements and fatigues of the day, they all early sought the rest which is never found in such perfection as in a mountain camp. Hemlock boughs formed the mattresses on which their blankets were spread, and soon there were no sounds except the strident chirpings of insects and the calls of night-birds.

There was one perturbed spirit, however, and at last Burt stole out and sat by the dying fire. When the mind is ready for impressions, a very little thing will produce them vividly, and Amy's snatch of song about "Jack and Jill" had awakened

Burt at last to a consciousness that he might be carrying his attentions to Miss Hargrove too far, in view of his vows and inexorable purpose of constancy. He assured himself that his only object was to have a good time, and enjoy the charming society of his new acquaintance. Of course, he was in love with Amy, and she was all that he could desire. Perhaps he had pursued the wrong tactics. Girls even like Amy were not so unsophisticated as they appeared to be, and he felt that he was profoundly experienced in such questions, if in nothing else. Had not her pride been touched? and would she not be led, by his evident admiration for Miss Hargrove, to believe that he was mercurial and not to be depended upon? He had to admit to himself that some experiences in the past had tended to give him this reputation. "I was only a boy then," he muttered, with a stern compression of the lips. "I'll prove that I am a man now;" and having made this sublime resolution, he slept the sleep of the just.

All who have known the freshness, the elasticity, the mental and physical vigor, with which one springs from a bed of boughs, will envy the camping party's awakening on the following morning. Webb resolved to remain and watch the drift of events, for he was growing almost feverish in his impatience for more definite proof that his hopes were not groundless. But he was doomed to disappointment and increasing doubt. Burt began to show himself a skilful diplomatist. He felt that, perhaps, he had checked himself barely in time to retrieve his fortunes and character with Amy, but he was too adroit to permit any marked change to appear in his manner and action. He said to himself that he cordially liked and admired Miss Hargrove, but he believed that she had enjoyed not a few flirtations, and was not averse to the addition of another to the list. Even his self-complacency had not led him to think that she regarded him in any other light than that of a very agreeable and useful summer friend. He had seen enough of society to be aware that such temporary friendships often border closely on the sentimental, and yet with no apparent trace remaining in after-years. To Amy, however, such affairs would not appear in the same light as they might to Miss Hargrove, and he felt that he had gone far enough. But not for the world would he be guilty of *gaucherie,* of neglecting Miss Hargrove for ostentatious devotion to Amy. Indeed, he was more pronounced in his admiration than ever, but in many little and unobtrusive ways he tried to prove to Amy that she had his deeper thoughts. She, however, was not at this time disposed to dwell upon the subject. His manner merely tended to confirm the view that he, like herself, regarded Miss Hargrove as a charming addition to their circle, and proposed that she should enjoy herself thoroughly while with them. Amy also reproached herself a little that she had doubted him so easily, and felt that he was giving renewed proof of his good sense. He could be true to her, and yet be most agreeable to her friend, and her former acquiescence in the future of his planning remained undisturbed. Webb was more like the brother she wished him to be than he had been for a long time. The little flower-bed was an abiding re-assurance, and so the present contained all that she desired.

This was not true of either Webb or Miss Hargrove. The former, however, did not lose heart. He thought he knew Burt too well to give up hope yet. The latter, with all her experience, was puzzled. She speedily became conscious of the absence of a certain warmth and genuineness in Burt's manner and words. The thermometer is not so sensitive to heat and cold as the intuition of a girl like Miss Hargrove to the mental attitude of an admirer, but no one could better hide her thoughts and feelings than she when once upon her guard.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN OLD TENEMENT.

THE few remaining days of August passed, and September came, bringing little suggestion of autumn rains or coolness. Dr. and Mrs. Marvin had joined them, and the former's interest in every wild creature of the woods became infectious. Alf and Fred were his ardent disciples, and he rarely found an indifferent listener in Amy. The heat of the day was given up to reading and the fashioning of alpenstocks, and the mornings and late afternoons to excursions. In one of these they had sat down to rest near an immense decaying tree that was hollow in parts, and full of holes from the topmost shattered branches to the ground.

"That," said the doctor, "might fitly be called an old tenement-house. You have no idea how many and various creatures may have found a home in it."

He was immediately urged to enumerate its possible inhabitants in the past, present, and future.

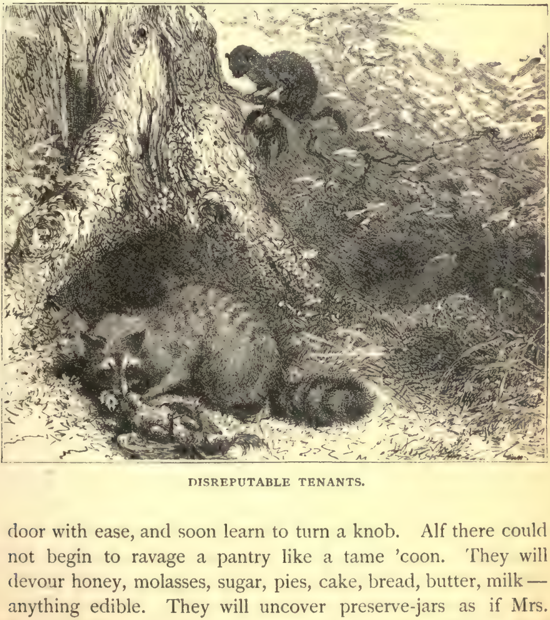
The doctor, pleased with the conceit of regarding the decaying tree in this light, began with animation: "All three of the squirrels of this region have undoubtedly dwelt in it. I scarcely need do more than mention the well-known saucy red or fox squirrel, whose delight is mischief. By the way, we have at home two tame robins that before they could fly were tumbled out of their nest by one of these ruthless practical jokers. The birds come in and out of the house like members of the family. The graceful gray squirrel is scarcely less familiar than the red one. He makes a lively pet, and we have all seen him turning the wheel attached to his cage. The curious little flying-squirrel, however, is a stranger even to those to whom he may be a near neighbor, for the reason that his habits are chiefly nocturnal. He ventures out occasionally on a cloudy day, but is shy and retiring. Thoreau relates an interesting experience with one. He captured it in a decayed hemlock stump, wherein it had a little nest of leaves, bits of bark, and pine needles. It bit viciously at first, and uttered a few 'dry shrieks,' but he carried it home. After it had been in his room a few hours it reluctantly allowed its soft fur to be stroked. He says it had 'very large, prominent black eyes, which gave it an innocent look. In color it was a chestnut ash, inclining to fawn, slightly browned, and white beneath. The under edge of his wings (?) tinged yellow, the upper dark, perhaps black.' He put it into a barrel, and fed it with an apple and shag-bark hickory-nuts. The next morning he carried it back and placed it on the stump from which it had been taken, and it ran up a sapling, from which it skimmed away to a large maple nine feet distant, whose trunk it struck about four feet from the ground. This tree it ascended thirty feet on the opposite side from Thoreau, then, coming into view, it eyed its quondam captor for a moment or two, as much as to say 'good-by.' Then away it went, first raising its head as if choosing its objective point. Thoreau says its progress is more like that of a bird than he had been led to believe from naturalists' accounts, or than he could have imagined possible in a quadruped. Its flight was not a regular descent on a given line. It veered to right and left, avoiding obstructions, passed between branches of trees, and flew horizontally part of the way, landing on the ground at last, over fifty-one feet from the foot of the tree from which it sprang. After its leap, however, it cannot renew its impetus in the air, but must alight and start again. It appears to sail and steer much like a hawk when the latter does not flap its wings. The little striped chipmunk, no doubt, has heaped up its store of nuts in the hole there that opens from the ground into the tree, and the pretty white-footed mouse, with its large eyes and ears, has had its apartment in the decayed recesses that exist in the worm-eaten roots.

"Opossums and raccoons are well-known denizens of trees, and both furnish famous country sports, especially in the South. ''Possum up de gum-tree, cooney in de hollow,' is a line from a negro ditty that touches a deep chord in the African heart. The former is found not infrequently in this region, but the Hudson seems to be the eastern boundary of its habitat."

"I took two from a tree in one night," Burt remarked.

"The raccoon's haunts, however, extend far to the northward, and it is abundant in the regions bordering on the Adirondacks, though not common in the dense pine woods of the interior. They are omnivorous creatures, and often rob nests of eggs and young birds, for they are expert climbers. They are fond of nuts and fruits, and especially of corn when in the condition of a milky pulp. Nor does poultry come amiss. They are also eager fishermen, although they are unable to pursue their prey under water like the otter and mink. They like to play in shallows, and leave no stone unturned in the hope of finding a crawfish under it. If fish have been left in land-locked pools, they are soon devoured. 'Coon-hunting by the light of the harvest-moon has long been one of the most noted of rural sports. During this month the corn kernels are in the most toothsome state for the 'coon bill of fare, and there are few fields near forests where they will not be marauding to-night, for they are essentially night prowlers. A 'coon hunt usually takes place near midnight. Men, with dogs trained to the sport, will repair to a corn-field known to be infested. The feasters are soon tracked and treed, then shot, or else the tree is felled, when such a snarling fight ensues as creates no little excitement. No matter how plucky a cur may be, he finds his match in an old 'coon, and often carries the scars of combat to his dying day.

"If taken when young, raccoons make amusing pets, and become attached to their masters, but they cannot be allowed at large, for they are as mischievous as monkeys. Their curiosity is boundless, and they will pry into everything within reach. Anything, to be beyond their reach, must be under lock and key. They use their fore-paws as hands, and will unlatch a door with ease, and soon learn to turn a knob. Alf there could not begin to ravage a pantry like a tame 'coon. They will devour honey, molasses, sugar, pies, cake, bread, butter, milk — anything edible. They will uncover preserve-jars as if Mrs. Leonard had given them lessons, and with the certainty of a toper uncork a bottle and get drunk on its contents."



DISREPUTABLE TENANTS.

"No pet 'coons, Alf, if you please," said his mother.

"Raccoons share with Reynard his reputation for cunning," the doctor resumed, "and deserve it, but they do not use this trait for self-preservation. They are not suspicious of unusual objects, and, unlike a fox, are easily trapped. They hibernate during the coldest part of the winter, re-appearing in the latter part of February or March. They are fond of little excursions, and usually travel in small family parties, taking refuge in hollow trees about daylight. They make their home high up, and prefer a hollow limb to the trunk of a tree. Some of those half-decayed limbs yonder would just suit them. They have their young in April — from four to six — and these little 'coons remain with the mother a year. While young they are fair eating, but grow tough and rank with age.

"Two other interesting animals may have lived in that tree, the least weasel and his sanguinary cousin the ermine, or large weasel. Both are brown, after the snow finally disappears, and both turn white with the first snow-storm."

"Now you are romancing, doctor," cried Miss Hargrove.

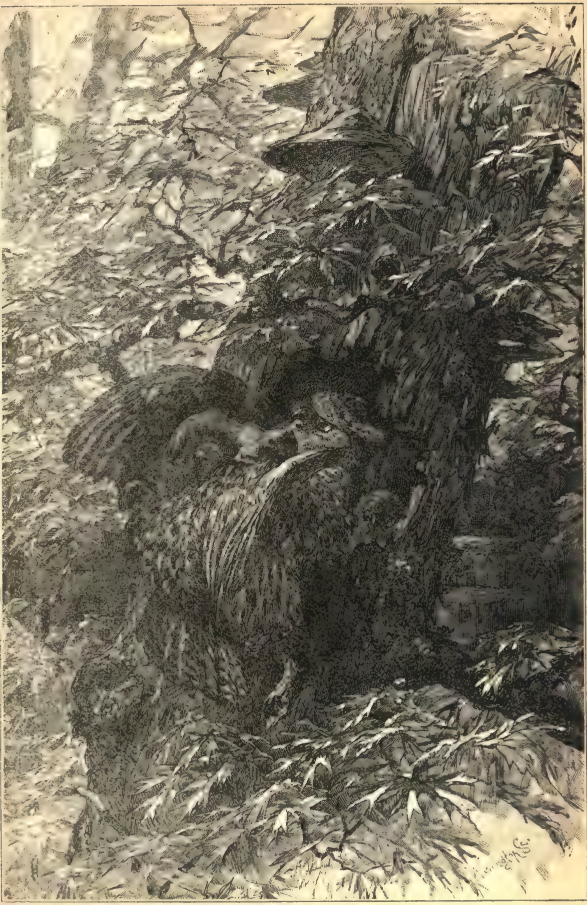
"Yes," added Leonard, "tell us that you have caught a weasel asleep, and we will, at least, look credulous; but this turning white with the first snow, and brown as soon as the snow is gone, is a little off color."

"It's true, nevertheless," maintained the doctor, "although I have seen no satisfactory explanation of the changes. They not only make their nests in hollow trees, but in the sides of banks. Were it not for its habit of destroying the eggs and young of birds, the least weasel might be regarded as a wholly useful creature, for it devours innumerable mice, moles, shrews, and insects, and does not attack larger animals or poultry. It is so exceedingly lithe and slender that its prey has no chance to escape. Where a mouse or a mole can go it can go also, and if outrun in the field, it follows the scent of its game like a hound, and is as relentless as fate in its pursuit. They are not very shy, and curiosity speedily overcomes their timidity. Sit down quietly, and they will investigate you with intense interest, and will even approach rather near in order to see better. Dr. Merriam describes one as standing bolt-upright, and eying him, with its head bent at right angles to its slender body. After a brief retreat it made many partial advances towards him, meanwhile constantly sniffing the air in his direction. I've no doubt Dr. Merriam would have liked to know the weasel's opinion. They have two or three litters a year, and the nest is made of dry leaves and herbage. The mother weasel will defend her young at any cost, and never hesitates to sacrifice her life in their behalf. She will fasten herself by her sharp teeth to the nose of a dog, and teach him that weasel-hunting has some drawbacks.

" In its next of kin, the ermine, or large weasel, we have perhaps the most cruel and bloodthirsty animal in existence. It is among mammals what the butcher-bird is among the feathered tribes — an assassin, a beautiful fiend. It would seem that nature reproduces among animals and plants every phase of human character. Was it Nero or Caligula who said, 'Oh, that Rome had but one neck, that I might sever it'? Such is the spirit that animates the ermine. Its instinct to kill is so strong that, were it possible, it would destroy the means of its subsistence. It would leave none of its varied prey alive. The lion and even the man-eating tiger, when gorged, are inert and quiet. They kill no more than they want for a meal; but the ermine will attack a poultry-yard, satiate itself with the brains of the fowls or by sucking their blood, and then, out of 'pure cussedness,' will kill all the rest within reach. Fifty chickens have been destroyed in a night by one of these remorseless little beasts. It makes fearful ravages among grouse, rabbits, and hares. It is the mythical vampire embodied. It is not very much larger than the least weasel, and has the same long, lithe, slender body and neck. A gray squirrel would look bulky beside one, but in indomitable courage and pitiless ferocity I do not think it has an equal. Only lack of material or bodily fatigue suspends its bloody work, and its life is one long career of carnage. It has a terrific set of teeth, which are worked by most powerful muscles. Dr. Coues, an eminent naturalist, has given a graphic account of him. His words, as I remember them, are a true portrait of a murderer. 'His forehead is low, and nose sharp; his eyes are small, penetrating, cunning, and glitter with an angry green light. His fierce face surmounts a body extraordinarily wiry, lithe, and muscular, which ends in a singularly long, slender neck that can be lifted at right angles with the body. When he is looking around, his neck stretched up, his flat, triangular head bent forward, swaying to and fro, we have the image of a serpent.'

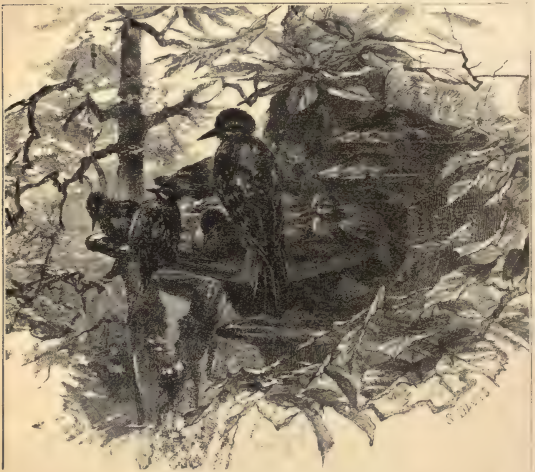
"This is a true picture of the ermine when excited or angry; when at rest, and in certain conditions of his fur, there are few more beautiful, harmless, innocent-looking creatures. Let one of the animals on which he preys approach, however, and instantly he becomes a demon. In the economy of nature he often serves a very useful purpose. In many regions field-mice are destructive. The ermine is their deadliest foe. A rat will fight a man, if cornered, but it gives up at once in abject terror when confronted by the large weasel. This arch-enemy has a pride in his hunting, and when taking up his quarters in a barn will collect in one place all the rats and mice he kills. Sometimes a hundred or more have been found together as the result of two or three nights' work. The ermine hunts, however, both by day and night, and climbs trees with great facility. He is by no means shy, and one has been known to try to kill chickens in a coop when a man was standing near him. Hunger was not his motive, for he had destroyed dozens of fowls the night before. The ermine has been used successfully as a ferret. Having first filed the creature's teeth down, so that it could not kill the game, a gentleman secured twelve live rabbits in one forenoon.

"But it's getting late, and time we started tentward, and yet I'm not through even the list of quadrupeds that may have dwelt in our old tenement. There are four species of



CAUGHT NAPPING.

bats to be mentioned, besides moles and shrews, that would burrow in its roots if they are as hollow as the branches. There are thirteen species of birds, including several very interesting families of woodpeckers, that would live in a tree like that, not to speak of tree-toads, salamanders, brown tree-lizards, insects and slugs innumerable, and black-snakes — "



THE WOODPECKER AT HOME.

"Snakes?" interrupted Burt, incredulously.

"Yes, snakes. I once put my hand in a hole for high-holders' eggs, and a big black-snake ran down my back, but not inside of my coat, however."

"Please say nothing more about snakes," cried Amy; and she rose decisively, adding, in a low tone: "Come, Gertrude, let us go. The tenants of the old tree that we've heard about may be very interesting to naturalists, but some of them are no more to my taste than the people in the slums of London."

"You have made our blood run cold with horrors — an agreeable sensation, however, to-day," said Burt, also rising. "Your ermine out-Herods Herod. By the way, is not the fur of this pitiless beast worn by the highest dignitaries of the legal profession?" and he hastened after the girls.

CHAPTER XLIV.

"BUT HE RISKED HIS LIFE?"

THE days passed, and the novelty of their mountain life began to wane a little. There were agreeable episodes, as, for instance, visits from Mr. Clifford, Mr. Hargrove, and the Rev. Mr. Barkdale, who were entertained in royal style; but, after all, the camping experience was not, apparently, fulfilling the hopes of two of the party. Webb's doubt and suspense had only been increased, and Miss Hargrove was compelled to admit to herself that her father's fears were not groundless. She was the life of the party, and yet she was not at rest. Even in her dreams there was a minor key of trouble and dread. The past few weeks were bringing a revelation. She had read novels innumerable; she had received tender confidences from friends. Love had been declared to her, and she had seen its eloquent pleading in more than one face; but she acknowledged that she had never known the meaning of the word until, without her volition, her own heart revealed to her the mystery. Reason and will might control her action, but she could no more divert her thoughts from Burt Clifford than a flower can turn from the sun. She wondered at herself, and was troubled. She had supposed that the training of society had brought her perfect self-possession, and she had looked forward to a match, when she was ready for one, in which the pros and cons should be weighed with diplomatic nicety; but now that her heart was touched she learned that nature is supreme, and her whole being revolted at such a union as she had contemplated. She saw the basis of true marriage — the glad consent of body and soul, and not a calculation. She watched Maggie closely, and saw that her life was happy and rounded out in spite of her many cares. It was not such a life as she would choose in its detail, and yet it was infinitely better than that of many of her acquaintances. Burt was no hero in her eyes, but he was immensely companionable, and it was a companion, not a hero, or a man remote from her life and interests, that she desired. He was refined and intelligent, if not learned; low, mean traits were conspicuously absent; but, above and beyond all, his mirthful blue eyes, and spirited ways and words, set all her nerves tingling with a delicious exhilaration which she could neither analyze nor control. In brief, the time that her father foresaw had come; the man had appeared who could do more than amuse; her whole nature had made its choice. She could go back to the city, and still in semblance be the beautiful and brilliant girl that she had been; but she knew that in all the future few waking hours would pass without her thoughts reverting to that little mountain terrace, its gleaming canvas, its gypsy-like fire, with a tall, lithe form often reclining at her feet beside it.

Would the future bring more than regretful memories? As time passed, she feared not.

As Burt grew conscious of himself, his pride was deeply touched. He knew that he had been greatly fascinated by Miss Hargrove, and, what was worse, her power had not declined after he had awakened to his danger; but he felt that Amy and all the family would despise him — indeed, that he would despise himself — should he so speedily transfer his allegiance; and under the spur of this dread he made especial, though very unobtrusive, efforts to prove his loyalty to Amy. Therefore Webb had grown despondent, and his absences from the camp were longer and more frequent. He pleaded the work of the farm, and the necessity of coping with the fearful drought, so plausibly that Amy felt that she could not complain, but, after all, there was a low voice of protest in her heart. "It's the old trouble," she thought. "The farm interests him far more than I ever can, and even when here his mind is absent."

Thus it may be seen that Nature, to whom they had gone, was not only busy with the mountain and its life, but that her silent forces were also at work in those whose unperverted hearts were not beyond her power.

But there are dark mysteries in Nature, and some of her creations appear to be visible and concentrated evil. The camping party came very near breaking up in a horrible tragedy. The day was growing warm, and they were returning from a rather extended excursion, straggling along a steep wood road that was partially overgrown with bushes. Burt had been a little more attentive to Miss Hargrove than usual, but was now at Amy's side with his ready laugh and jest. Dr. Marvin was in the rear, peering about, as usual, for some object of interest to a naturalist. Miss Hargrove, so far from succumbing to the increasing heat, was reluctant to return, and seemed possessed with what might be almost termed a nervous activity. She had been the most indefatigable climber of the party, and on their return had often diverged from the path to gather a fern or some other sylvan trifle. At one point the ascending path formed an angle with a ledge of rock that made a little platform. At the farther end of this she saw a flower, and she went to get it. A moment or two later Burt and Amy heard her scream, and the sound of her voice seemed almost beneath them. Grasping his alpenstock firmly, Burt sprang through the intervening copsewood, and witnessed a scene that he never forgot, though he paused not a second in his horror. Even as he rushed towards her a huge rattlesnake was sending forth the "long, loud, stinging whir" which, as Dr. Holmes says, is "the dreadful sound that nothing which breathes can hear unmoved." Miss Hargrove was looking down upon it, stupefied, paralyzed with terror. Already the reptile was coiling its thick body for the deadly stroke, when Burt's stock fell upon its neck and laid it writhing at the girl's feet. With a flying leap from the rock above he landed on the venomous head, and crushed it with his heel. He had scarcely time to catch Miss Hargrove, when she became apparently a lifeless burden in his arms.

Dr. Marvin now reached him, and after a glance at the scene exclaimed, "Great God! Burt, she was not bitten?"

"No; but let us get away from here. Where there's one of these devils there is usually another not far off;" and they carried the unconscious girl swiftly towards the camp, which fortunately was not far away, all the others following with dread and anxiety in their faces.

Dr. Marvin's and Maggie's efforts soon revived Miss Hargrove, but she had evidently received a very severe nervous shock. When at last Burt was permitted to see her, she gave him her hand with such a look of gratitude, and something more, which she could not then disguise, that his heart began to beat strangely fast. He was so confused that he could only stammer some incoherent words of congratulation; but he half-consciously gave her hand a pressure that left the most delicious pain the young girl had ever known. He was deeply excited, for he had taken a tremendous risk in springing upon a creature that can strike its crooked fangs through the thick leather of a boot, as a New York physician once learned at the cost of his life, when he carelessly sought to rouse with his foot a caged reptile of this kind.

Miss Hargrove had ceased to be a charming summer acquaintance to Burt. She was the woman at whose side he had stood in the presence of death.

Before their midday repast was ready a rumble of wagons was heard coming up the mountain, and Webb soon appeared. "The barometer is falling rapidly," he said, "and father agrees with me that it will be safer for you all to return at once."

He found ready acquiescence, for after the event of the morning the ladies were in haste to depart. Lumley, who had come up with Webb, was sent to take the rattles from the snake, and the men drew apart, with Alf and Fred, to discuss the adventure, for it was tacitly agreed that it would be unwise to talk about snakes to those whose nerves were already unstrung at the thought of such fearful neighbors. Dr. Marvin would have gone with Lumley had not his wife interposed. As it was, he had much to say concerning the habits and character of the reptiles, to which the boys listened with awe. "By the way," he concluded, "I remember a passage from that remarkable story, 'Elsie Venner,' by Oliver Wendell Holmes, in which he gives the most vivid description of the rattlesnake I have ever seen. One of his characters has two of them in a cage. 'The expression of the creatures,' he writes, 'was watchful, still, grave, passionless, fate-like, suggesting a cold malignity which seemed to be waiting for its opportunity. Their awful, deep-cut mouths were sternly closed over long, hollow fangs, which rested their roots against the swollen poison-gland where the venom had been hoarded up ever since the last stroke had emptied it. They never winked, for ophidians have no movable eyelids, but kept up an awful fixed stare. Their eyes did not flash, but shone with a cold, still light. They were of a pale golden color, horrible to look into, with their stony calmness, their pitiless indifference, hardly enlivened by the almost imperceptible vertical slit of the pupil, through which Death seemed to be looking out, like the archer behind the long, narrow loophole in a blank turret wall.' The description is superb, and impressed itself so deeply on my mind that I can always recall it."

The ladies now joined them at dinner — the last at their rustic board. Miss Hargrove was very pale, but she was a spirited girl, and was bent on proving that there was nothing weak or hysterical in her nature. Neither was there the flippancy that a shallow woman might have manifested. She acted like a brave, well-bred lady, whose innate refinement and good sense enabled her speedily to regain her poise, and take her natural place among her friends. They all tried to be considerate, and

Amy's solicitude did not indicate the jealousy that her friend almost expected to see.

Before they had finished their repast an east wind was moaning and sighing in the trees, and a thin scud of clouds overcasting the sky. They were soon in the haste and bustle of departure. Miss Hargrove found an opportunity, however, to draw Dr. Marvin aside, and asked, hesitatingly,

"If Burt — if Mr. Clifford had missed his aim when he sprang upon the snake, what would have happened?"

"You had better not dwell on that scene for the present, Miss Hargrove."

"But I wish to know," she said, decisively. "I am not a child, and I think I have a right to know."

"Well," said the doctor, gravely, "you are brave about it, and may as well know the truth. Indeed, a little thought would soon make it clear to you that if he had struck the body of the snake and left its head free, it would have bitten him."

She drew a long breath, and said, "I thought as much;" then added, in a low tone, "Would it have been death?"

"Not necessarily; but only the most vigorous treatment could have saved him."

"But he risked his life?" she persisted.

"Certainly; but a brave man could scarcely have acted otherwise. The snake was at your very feet."

"Thank you," she said, simply, and there was a very gentle expression in her eyes.

Much of the work of breaking up was left to Lumley, and an abundant reward for his labor. He had returned with an exultant grin, but at a sign from Dr. Marvin concealed his trophies. As soon as he had a chance, however, he gave Burt two rattles, one having twelve and the other fourteen joints, thus proving the fear, that the mate of the snake first killed was not far off, to be well grounded. At the foot of the mountain they met Mr. Hargrove, driving rapidly. He explained that his barometer and the indications of a storm had alarmed him also, and that he had come for his daughter and Fred. Nothing was said of Miss Hargrove's recent peril in the brief, cordial parting. Her eyes and Burt's met almost involuntarily as she was driven away, and he was deeply perturbed.

The face of Nature was also clouding fast, and she was sighing and moaning as if she, too, dreaded the immediate future.

CHAPTER XLV.

SUMMER'S WEEPING FAREWELL.

NATURE was at last awakening from her long, death-like repose with an energy that was startling. The thin skirmish-line of vapor was followed by cloudy squadrons, and before sunset great masses of mist were pouring over Storm King, suggesting that the Atlantic had taken the drought in hand, and meant to see what it could do. The wind mourned and shrieked about the house, as if trouble, and not relief, were coming. In spite of the young moon, the night grew intensely dark. The dash of rain was expected every moment, but it did not come.

Amy thought with a shudder of their desolate camping-ground. Time must pass before pleasant associations could be connected with it. The intense darkness, the rush and roar of the coming storm, the agony, the death that might have occurred there, were now uppermost in her mind. She had found an opportunity to ask Webb questions similar to those of Miss Hargrove, and he had given Burt full credit for taking a fearful risk. A woman loves courage in the abstract, and when it is shown in behalf of herself or those whom she loves, he who has manifested it becomes heroic. But her homage troubled Burt, who was all at sea, uncertain of himself, of the future, of almost everything, but not quite uncertain as to Miss Hargrove. There was something in her look when they first met after their common peril that went straight to his deepest consciousness. He had before received, with not a little complacency, glances of preference, but none like that, in which a glimpse of feeling, deep and strong, had been revealed in a moment of weakness. The thought of it moved him far more profoundly than the remembrance of his danger. Indeed, he scarcely thought of that, except as it was associated with a girl who now might have been dead or dying, and who, by a glance, had seemed to say, "What you saved is yours."

If this were true it was indeed a priceless, overwhelming gift, and he was terrified at himself as he found how his whole nature was responding. He also knew that it was not in his frank, impetuous spirit to disguise deep feeling. Should Miss Hargrove control his heart, he feared that all would eventually know it, as they had speedily discovered his other little affairs. And little, indeed, they now seemed to him, relating to girls as immature as himself. Some had since married, others were engaged, "and none ever lost their appetites," he concluded, with a grim smile.

But he could not thus dismiss the past so far as Amy was concerned, the orphan girl in his own home to whom he had promised fealty. What would be his feeling towards another man who had promised so much and had proved fickle? What would the inmates of his own home say? What would even his gentle mother, of whom he had made a confidante, think of him? Would not a look of pain, or, even worse, of scorn, come into Amy's eyes? He did love her dearly; he respected her still more as the embodiment of truth and delicacy. From Miss Hargrove's manner he knew that Amy had never gossiped about him, as he felt sure nine tenths of his acquaintances would have done. He also believed that she was taking him at his word, like the rest of the family, and that she was looking forward to the future that he had once so ardently desired. The past had taught him that she was not one to fall tumultuously in love, but rather that she would let a quiet and steady flame kindle in her heart, to last through life. She had proved herself above hasty and resentful jealousy, but she had, nevertheless, warned him on the mountain, and had received the renewed manifestations of his loyalty as a matter of course. Since his rescue of her friend in the morning her eyes had often sought his with a lustre so gentle and approving that he felt guilty, and cursed himself for a fickle wretch. Cost him what it might, he must be true to her.

She, little divining his tragic mood, which, with the whole force of his will, he sought to disguise, gave him an affectionate good-night kiss as she said, "Dear Burt, how happily the day has ended, after all! — and we know the reason why."

"Yes, Burt," added Webb; "no man ever did a braver thing."

His father's hearty praise, and even his mother's grateful and almost passionate embrace, only added to his deep unrest. As he went to his room he groaned, "If they only knew!"

After very little and troubled sleep he awoke on the following morning depressed and exhausted. Mental distress was a new experience, and he showed its effects; but he made light of it, as the result of over-excitement and fatigue. He felt that Nature harmonized with his mood, for he had scarcely ever looked upon a gloomier sky. Yet, strange to say, no rain had fallen. It seemed as if the malign spell could not be broken. The wind that had been whirling the dust in clouds all night long grew fitful, and died utterly away, while the parched earth and withered herbage appeared to look at the mocking clouds in mute, despairing appeal. How could they be so near, so heavy, and yet no rain? The air was sultry and lifeless. Fall had come, but no autumn days as yet. Experienced Mr. Clifford looked often at the black, lowering sky, and predicted that a decided change was at hand.

"My fear is," he added, "that the drought may be followed by a deluge. I don't like the looks of the clouds in the southeast."

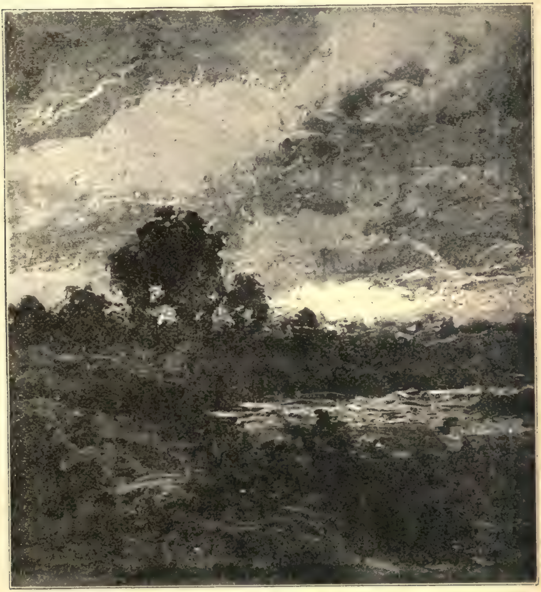
Even as he spoke a gleam of lightning shot athwart them, and was soon followed by a heavy rumble of thunder. It seemed that the electricity, or, rather, the concussion of the air, precipitated the dense vapor into water, for within a few moments down came the rain in torrents. As the first great drops struck the roads the dust flew up as if smitten by a blow, and then, with scarcely any interval, the gutters and every incline were full of tawny rills, that swelled and grew with hoarser and deeper murmurs, until they combined in one continuous roar with the downfall from clouds that seemed scarcely able to lift themselves above the tree-tops. The lightning was not vivid, but often illumined the obscurity with a momentary dull red glow, and thunder muttered and growled in the distance almost without cessation.

The drought had been depressing. To Amy its gloomy, portentous ending was even more so. The arid noonday heat and glare of preceding days had given place to a twilight so unnatural that it had almost the awe-inspiring effect of an eclipse. The hitherto brazen sky seemed to have become an overhanging reservoir from which poured a vertical cataract. The clouds drooped so heavily, and were so black, that they gave an impression of impending solid masses that might fall at any moment with crushing weight. Within an hour the beds of streams long dry were full and overflowing.

In spite of remonstrances Webb put on a rubber suit, and went to look after some little bridges on the place. He soon returned, and said, "If this keeps up until morning, there will be a dozen bridges lacking in our region. I've tried to anchor some of our little affairs by putting heavy stones on them, so that the water will pass over instead of sweeping them away. It makes one think that the flood was no myth."

To the general relief, the rain slackened in the late afternoon, and soon ceased. The threatening pall of clouds lifted a little, and in rocky channels on the mountains the dull gleam of rushing water could be seen. From every side its voice was heard, the scale running up, from the gurgle in the pipes connected with the roof, to the roar of the nearest large stream. The drought was truly broken.

As the day advanced Burt had grown very restless. Amy watched him curiously. The long day of imprisonment had given time for thought, and a review of the past novel and exciting experiences. She had not seen the glances from Miss Hargrove which had suggested so much to Burt, but she had long since perceived that her friend greatly enjoyed his society. Had she loved him she would have seen far more. If this interest had been shown in Webb, she would have understood



STORMY WEATHER.

herself and Miss Hargrove also much better. Pre-occupied as she was by her sense of loss and shortcoming produced by Webb's apparent absorption in pursuits which she did not share, the thought had repeatedly occurred to her that Miss Hargrove's interest in Burt might be more than passing and friendly. If this were true, she was sure the event of the preceding day must develop and deepen it greatly. And now Burt's manner, his fits of absent-mindedness, during which he stared at vacancy, awakened surmises also. "Where are his thoughts?" she queried, and she resolved to find out.

"Burt," she said, arousing him from one of the lapses into deep thought which alternated with his restless pacings and rather forced gayety, "it has stopped raining. I think you ought to ride over and see how Gertrude is. I feel real anxious about her."

His face lighted up with eagerness. "Do you truly think I ought to go?" he asked.

"Certainly, and it would be a favor to me also," she added.

He looked at her searchingly for a moment, but there was nothing in her friendly expression to excite his fears.

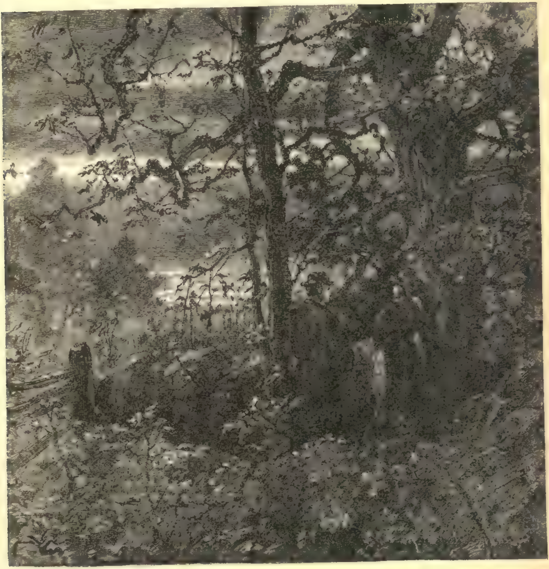
"Very well," he tried to say quietly. "I'll go. A swift gallop would do me good, I believe."

"Of course it will, and so will a walk brighten me up. I'm going out to see the brook."

"Let me go with you," he exclaimed, with an eagerness too pronounced.

"No, please. I'd rather hear how Gertrude is;" and she went to her room to prepare for her walk, smiling a little bitterly as she mused: "I now know where his thoughts were. I must be lacking indeed. Not only brother Webb, but also lover Burt, has grown weary of me. I can't entertain either of them through one rainy day." From her window she saw Burt riding away with a promptness that brought again the smile rarely seen on her fair features. In her light rubber suit, she started on her ramble, her face almost as clouded as the sky. Another had been on the watch also, and Webb soon joined her, with the question, "May I not go too?"

"Oh, I fear it will take too much of your time," she said, in tones that were a little constrained.



IN THE GLOAMING.

He saw that she was depressed. He, too, had been interpreting Burt, and guessed his destination as he galloped away. His love for Amy was so deep that in a generous impulse of self-forgetfulness he was sorry for her, and sought to cheer her, and make what poor amends he could for Burt's absence, and all that it foreboded. "Since you don't say outright that I can't go," he said, "I think I'll venture;" and then, in a quiet, genial way, he began to talk about the storm and its effects. She would not have believed that even remarkable weather could be made so interesting a topic as it soon proved. Before long they stood upon the bank, and saw a dark flood rushing by where but yesterday had trickled a little rill. Now it would carry away horse and rider, should they attempt to ford it, and the fields beyond were covered with water.

"I don't like these violent changes," said Amy. "Tennyson's brook, that 'goes on forever,' is more to my taste than one like this, that almost stops, and then breaks out into a passionate, reckless torrent."

"It's the nature of this brook; you should not blame it," he answered. "But see, it's falling rapidly already."

"Oh, certainly; nothing lasts," and she turned away abruptly.

"You are mistaken, sister Amy," he replied, with strong, quiet emphasis.

The early twilight deepened around them, and gloomy night came on apace, but before Amy re-entered the house his unselfish efforts were rewarded. Burt's threatened disloyalty apparently had lost its depressing influence. Some subtile re-assuring power had been at work, and the clouds passed from her face, if not from the sky.

CHAPTER XLVI.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

THAT sombre day would ever be a memorable one to Miss Hargrove. Nature seemed weeping passionately over the summer that had gone, with all its wealth of beauty and life. She knew that her girlhood had gone with it. She had cautioned her brother to say nothing of her escape on the previous day, for she was too unnerved to go over the scene again that night, and meet her father's questioning eyes. She wanted to be alone first and face the truth; and this she had done in no spirit of weak self-deception. The shadow of the unknown had fallen upon her, and in its cold gray light the glitter and tinsel of the world had faded, but unselfish human love had grown more luminous. The imminence of death had kindled rather than quenched it. It was seen to be something intrinsically precious, something that might survive even the deadliest poison.

Her father was disposed to regard Burt as one who looked upon life in the light of a pleasure excursion, and who might never take it seriously. His laugh hereafter could never be so light and careless to her but that, like a minor key, would run the thought, "He risked his life for me; he might have died for me."

Her dark, full eyes, the warm blood that her thoughts brought into her face even in the solitude of her chamber, did not belie her nature, which was intense, and capable of a strong and an abiding passion when once kindled.

Mr. Hargrove had watched her with the deepest solicitude on her return, and he felt rather than saw the change that had taken place in his idol. She had pleaded fatigue, and retired early. In the morning she was again conscious of his half-questioning scrutiny, and when he went to his study she followed, and told him what had occurred. He grew very pale, and drew a long, deep breath. Then, as if mastered by a strong impulse, he clasped her to his heart, and said, in trembling tones, "Oh, Trurie, if I had lost you!"

"I fear you would have lost me, papa, had it not been for Mr. Clifford."

He paced the room for a few moments in agitation, and at last stopped before her and said: "Perhaps in a sense I am to lose you after all. Has Mr. Clifford spoken?"

"No, papa; he has only risked his life to save mine."

"You are very grateful?"

"Yes."

"Do not think I underestimate his act, Trurie; but, believe me, if he should speak now or soon, you are in no condition to answer him."

She smiled incredulously.

"He did what any man would do for a woman in peril. He has no right to claim such an immense reward."

"Before I went to the mountains I said I was no longer a child; but I was, compared with what I am now. It seems to me that feeling, experience, more than years, measures our age. I am a woman to-day, one who has been brought so near the future world that I have been taught how to value what may be ours now. I have learned how to value you and your unselfish love as I never did before. Mr. Clifford will not speak very soon, if he ever does, and I have not yet decided upon my answer. Should it be favorable, rest assured more than gratitude will prompt me; and also be assured you would not lose me. Could I not be more to you were I happy than if I went through life with the feeling that I had missed my chance?"

"I fear your mother would never give her consent to so unworldly a choice," he said, with a troubled brow.

"I've yet to be convinced that it would be such a choice. It's scarcely unworldly to make the most and the best of the world one is in, and mamma must permit me to judge for myself, as she chose for herself. I shall never marry any one but a gentleman, and one who can give me a home. Have I not a right to prefer a home to an establishment, papa?"

He looked at her long and searchingly, and she met his scrutiny with a grave and gentle dignity. "I suppose we must submit to the inevitable," he said at last.

"Yes, papa."

"It seems but the other day that you were a baby on my knee," he began, sadly; "and now you are drifting far away."

"No, papa, there shall be no drifting whatever. I shall marry, if ever, one whom I have learned to love according to Nature's simple laws — one to whom I can go without effort or calculation. I could give my heart, and be made rich indeed by the gift. I couldn't invest it; and if I did, no one would be more sorry than you in the end."

"I should indeed be more than sorry if I ever saw you unhappy," he said, after another thoughtful pause; then added, shaking his head, "I've seen those who gave their hearts even more disappointed with life than those who took counsel of prudence."

"I shall take counsel of prudence, and of you too, papa."

"I think it is as I feared — you have already given your heart."

She did not deny it. Before leaving him she pleaded: "Do not make much of my danger to mamma. She is nervous, and not over-fond of the country at best. You know that a good many people survive in the country," she concluded, with a smile that was so winning and disarming that he shook his head at her as he replied:

"Well, Trurie, I foresee what a lovingly obstinate little girl you are likely to prove. I think I may as well tell you first as last that you may count on me in all that is fairly rational. If, with my years and experience, I can be so considerate, may I hope that you will be also?"

Her answer was re-assuring, and she went to tell her mother She had been forestalled. Fred was quite as confidential with his mother as she with her father, and the boy had been wild to horrify Mrs. Hargrove by an account of his sister's adventure. The injunction laid upon him had been only for the previous evening, and Gertrude found her mother almost hysterical over the affair, and less inclined to commend Burt than to blame him as the one who had led her daughter into such "wild, harum-scarum experiences." "It's always the way," she exclaimed, "when one goes out of one's own natural associations in life."

"I've not been out of my natural associations," Gertrude answered, hotly. "The Cliffords are as well-bred and respectable as we are;" and she went to her room.

It was a long, dismal day for her, but, as she had said to her father, she would not permit herself to drift. Her nature was too positive for idle, sentimental dreaming. Feeling that she was approaching one of the crises of her life, she faced it resolutely and intelligently. She went over the past weeks from the time she had first met Burt under the Gothic willow arch, and tried to analyze not only the power he had over her, but also the man himself. "I have claimed to papa that I am a woman, and I should act like one," she thought. A few things grew plain. Her interest in Burt had been a purely natural growth, the unsought result of association with one who had proved congenial. He was so handsome, so companionable, so vital with spirit and mirthfulness, that his simple presence was exhilarating, and he had won his influence like the sun in spring-time. Had he the higher qualities of manhood, those that could sustain her in the inevitable periods when life would be no laughing matter? Could he meet the winter of life as well as the summer? She felt that she scarcely knew him well enough to be sure of this, but she was still sufficiently young and romantic to think, "If he should ever love me as I can love him, I could bring out the qualities that papa fears are lacking." His courage seemed an earnest of all that she could desire.

Amy's feeling towards him, and the question whether he had ever regarded her in another light than that of a sister, troubled her the most. Amy's assurance of implicit trust, and her promise to deserve it, appeared to stand directly in her path, and before that stormy day closed she had reached the calmness of a fixed resolution. "If Amy loves him, and he has given her reason to do so, I shall not come between them, cost me what it may. I'll do without happiness rather than snatch it from a friend who has not only spoken her trust, but proved it."

Therefore, although her heart gave a great bound as she saw Burt riding towards the house in the late afternoon, she went to her father and said: "Mr. Clifford is coming. I wish you would be present during his call."

The young fellow was received cordially, and Mr. Hargrove acknowledged his indebtedness so feelingly that Burt flushed like a girl, and was greatly embarrassed. He soon recovered himself, however, and chatted in his usual easy and spirited way. Before he left he asked, hesitatingly, "Would you like a souvenir of our little episode yesterday?" and took from his pocket the rattles of the snake he had killed.

"It was not a little episode," Gertrude replied, gravely. "I shall indeed value the gift, for it will remind me that I have a friend who did not count the cost in trying to help me."

Impetuous words rose to Burt's lips, but he checked them in time. Trembling for his resolutions, he soon took his departure, and rode homeward in deeper disquiet than he had ever known. He gave Amy her friend's messages, and he also, in spite of himself, afforded her a clearer glimpse of what was passing in his mind than she had received before. "I might have learned to love him in time, I suppose," she thought, bitterly, "but it's impossible now. I shall build my future on no such uncertain foundation, and I shall punish him a little too, for it's time he had a lesson."

CHAPTER XLVII.

DISQUIET WITHIN AND WITHOUT.

AMY would scarcely have been human had she felt otherwise, for it appeared that Burt was in a fair way to inflict a slight that would touch the pride of the gentlest nature. During her long residence abroad Amy had in a general and unthinking way adopted some English ideas on the subject of marriage. Burt had at first required what was unnatural and repugnant, and she had resented the demand that she should pass from an age and a state of feeling slightly removed from childhood to relations for which she was not ready. When he had sensibly recognized his error, and had appeared content to wait patiently and considerately, she had tacitly assented to his hopes and those of his parents. Her love and gratitude towards the latter influenced her powerfully, and she saw no reason why she should disappoint them. But she was much too high-spirited a girl to look with patience on any wavering in Burt. She had not set her heart on him or sought to be more to him than to a brother, and if he wished for more he must win and hold the right by undoubted loyalty. The fact that Amy had been brought into the Clifford family as a daughter and sister had not cheated Nature a moment, as both Burt and Webb had proved. She was not their sister, and had unconsciously evoked from each of the young men a characteristic regard. Burt must not be judged too harshly. He had to contend with a temperament not uncommon — one that renders its possessor highly susceptible to the beauty and fascination of women.

He was as far removed from the male flirt genus as sincerity is from falsehood; but his passion for Amy had been more like a manifestation of a trait than a strong individual preference based on mutual fitness and helpfulness. Miss Hargrove was more truly his counterpart. She could supplement the weaknesses and defects of his character more successfully than Amy, and in a vague way he felt this. With all the former's vivacity there was much reserve strength and magnetism. She was unusually gifted with will power, and having once gained an influence over a person, she would have, as agents to maintain it, not only her beauty, but tact, keen insight, and a very quick intelligence. Although true herself, she was by no means unsophisticated, and having once comprehended Burt's character, she would have the power, possessed by few others, to make the most of him.

Amy was nearer to nature. She would first attract unconsciously, like a rare and beautiful flower, and the loveliness and fragrance of her life would be undying. Burt had felt her charm, and responded most decisively; but the tranquil regard of her unawakened heart had little power to retain and deepen his feeling. She bloomed on at his side, sweet to him, sweet to all. In Miss Hargrove's dark eyes lurked a stronger spell, and he almost dared to believe that they had revealed to him a love of which he began to think Amy was not capable. On the generous young fellow, whose intentions were good, this fact would have very great influence, and in preserving her supremacy Miss Hargrove would also be able to employ not a little art and worldly wisdom.

The events that are most desired do not always happen, however, and poor Burt felt that he had involved himself in complications of which he saw no solution; while Amy's purpose to give him "a lesson" promised anything but relief. Her plan involved scarcely any change in her manner towards him. She would simply act as if she believed all that he had said, and take it for granted that his hopes for the future were unchanged. She proposed, however, to maintain this attitude only long enough to teach him that it is not wise, to say the least, to declare undying devotion too often to different ladies.

The weather during the night and early on the following morning was puzzling. It might be that the storm was passing, and that the ragged clouds which still darkened the sky were the rear-guard or the stragglers that were following the sluggish advance of its main body; or it might be that there was a partial break in Nature's forces, and that heavier cloud-masses were still to come. Mr. Clifford inclined to the latter view. "Old Storm King is still shrouded," he said at the breakfast-table, "and this heavy, sultry air does not indicate clearing weather."

Events soon confirmed his opinion. Nature seemed bent on repeating the programme of the preceding day, with the purpose of showing how much more she could do on the same line of action. There was no steady wind from any quarter. Converging or conflicting currents in the upper air may have brought heavy clouds together in the highlands to the southwest, for although the rain began to fall heavily, it could not account for the unprecedented rise of the streams. In little over an hour there was a continuous roar of rushing water. Burt, restless and almost reckless, went out to watch the floods. He soon returned to say that every bridge on the place had gone, and that what had been dry and stony channels twenty-four hours before were now filled with resistless torrents.

Webb also put on his rubber suit, and they went down the main street towards the landing. This road, as it descended through a deep valley to the river, was bordered by a stream that drained for some miles the northwestern slope of the mountains. For weeks its rocky bed had been dry; now it was filled with a river yellow as the Tiber. One of the main bridges across it was gone, and half of the road in one place had been scooped out and carried away by the furious waters. People were removing their household goods out into the vertical deluge lest they and all they had should be swept into the river by the torrent that was above their doorsteps. The main steamboat wharf, at which the *Powell* had touched but a few hours before, was scarcely passable with boats, so violent was the current that poured over it. The rise had been so sudden that people could scarcely realize it, and strange incidents had occurred. A horse attached to a wagon had been standing in front of a store. A vivid flash of lightning startled the animal, and he broke away, galloped up a side street to the spot where the bridge had been, plunged in, was swept down, and scarcely more than a minute had elapsed before he was back within a rod or two of his starting-point, crushed and dead.

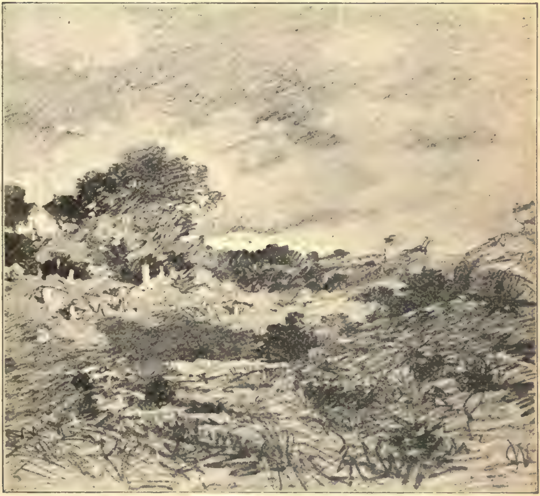
Webb soon returned. He had noticed that Amy's eyes had followed him wistfully, and almost reproachfully, as he went out. Nature's mood was one to inspire awe, and something akin to dread, in even his own mind. She appeared to have lost or to have relaxed her hold upon her forces. It seemed that the gathered stores of moisture from the dry, hot weeks of evaporation were being thrown recklessly away, regardless of consequences. There was no apparent storm-centre, passing steadily to one quarter of the heavens, but on all sides the lightning would leap from the clouds, while mingling with the nearer and louder peals was the heavy and continuous monotone from flashes below the horizon.

He was glad he had returned, for he found Amy pale and nervous indeed. Johnnie had been almost crying with terror, and had tremblingly asked her mother if Noah's flood could come again.

"No," said Maggie, confidently. "If there was to be another flood, grandpa would have been told to build an ark;" and this assurance had appeared so obviously true that the child's fears were quieted. Even Leonard's face was full of gloom and foreboding, when the children were not present, as he looked out on flooded fields, and from much experience estimated the possible injury to the farm and the town. Mr.

and Mrs. Clifford were quiet and serene. They had attained a peace which was not easily disturbed, and the old gentleman remarked: "I have seen a worse storm even in this vicinity. You must remember it, Leonard."

"But this deluge isn't over," was the reply. "It seems a tremendous re-action from the drought, and where it will end it is hard to tell, unless this steady downpouring slackens soon."



A STORMY DAY.

Leonard's fears were not realized, however. The unusual and tropical manifestations of the storm at last ceased, and by night the rain fell softly and gently, as if Nature were penitent over her wild passion. The results of it, however, were left in all directions. Many roads were impassable; scores of bridges were gone. The passengers from the evening boats were landed on a wharf partially submerged, and some were taken in boats to a point whence they could reach their carriages.

In the elements' disquiet Burt had found an excuse for his own, and he had remained out much of the day. He had not called on Miss Hargrove again, but had ridden far enough to learn that the bridges in that direction were safe. All the family had remonstrated with him for his exposure, and Amy asked him, laughingly, if he had been "sitting on bridges to keep them from floating away."

"You are growing ironical," he answered, for he was not in an amiable mood, and he retired early.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

IDLEWILD.

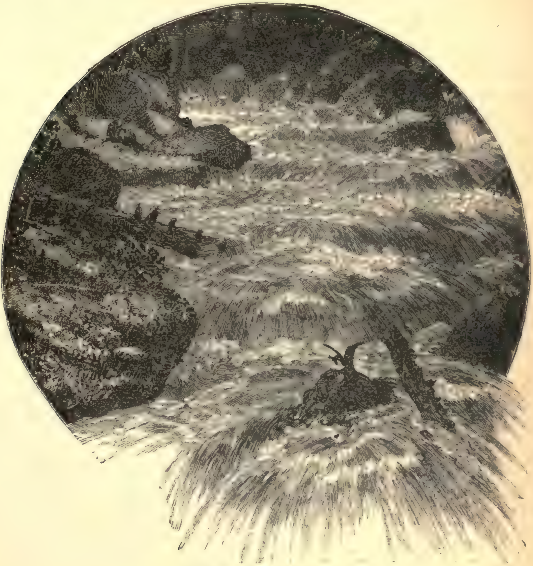
IN the morning Nature appeared to have forgotten both her passion and her penitence, and smiled serenely over the havoc she had made, as if it were of no consequence.

Amy said, "Let us take the strong rockaway, call for Miss Hargrove, and visit some of the streams;" and she noted that Burt's assent was too undemonstrative to be natural. Maggie decided to go also, and take the children, while Leonard proposed to devote the day to repairing the damage to the farm, his brothers promising to aid him in the afternoon.

When at last the party left their carriage at one of the entrances of Idlewild, the romantic glen made so famous by the poet Willis, a stranger might have thought that he had never seen a group more in accord with the open, genial sunshine. This would be true of Maggie and the children. They thought of what they saw, and uttered all their thoughts. The solution of one of life's deep problems had come to Maggie, but not to the others, and such is the nature of this problem that its solution can usually be reached only by long and hidden processes. Not one of the four young people was capable of a deliberately unfair policy; all, with the exception of Amy, were conscious whither Nature was leading them, and she had thoughts also of which she would not speak. There was no lack of truth in the party, and yet circumstances had brought about a larger degree of reticence than of frankness. To borrow an illustration from Nature, who, after all, was to blame for what was developing in each heart, a rapid growth of root was taking place, and the flower and fruit would inevitably manifest themselves in time. Miss Hargrove naturally had the best command over herself. She had taken her course, and would abide by it, no matter what she might suffer. Burt had mentally set his teeth, and resolved that he would be not only true to Amy, but also his old gay self. His pride was now in the ascendant. Amy, however, was not to be deceived, and her intuition made it clear that he was no longer her old happy, contented comrade. But she was too proud to show that her pride was wounded, and appeared to be her former self. Webb, as usual, was quiet, observant, and not altogether hopeless. And so this merry party, innocent, notwithstanding all their hidden thoughts about each other, went down into the glen, and saw the torrent flashing where the sunlight struck it through the overhanging foliage. Half-way down the ravine there was a rocky, wooded plateau from which they had a view of the flood for some distance, as it came plunging towards them with a force and volume that appeared to threaten the solid foundations of the place on which they stood. With a roar of baffled fury it sheered off to the left, rushed down another deep descent, and disappeared from view. The scene formed a strange blending of peace and beauty with wild, fierce movement and uproar. From the foliage above and around them came a soft, slumberous sound, evoked by the balmy wind that fanned their cheeks. The ground and the surface of the torrent were flecked with waving, dancing light and shade, as the sunlight filtered through innumerable leaves, on some of which a faint tinge of red and gold was beginning to appear. Beneath and through all thundered a dark, resistless tide, fit emblem of lawless passion that, unchanged, unrestrained by gentle influences, pursues its downward course reckless of consequences. Although the volume of water passing beneath their feet was still immense, it was evident that it had been very much greater. "I stood here yesterday afternoon," said Burt, "and then the sight was truly grand."

"Why, it was raining hard in the afternoon!" exclaimed Miss Hargrove.

"Burt seemed even more perturbed than the weather yesterday," Amy remarked, laughing. "He was out nearly all the time. We were alarmed about him, fearing lest he should be washed away, dissolved, or something."



THE SWOLLEN STREAM.

"Do I seem utterly quenched this morning?" he asked, in a light vein, but flushing deeply.

"Oh, no, not in the least, and yet it's strange, after so much cold water has fallen on you."

"One is not quenched by such trifles," he replied, a little coldly.

They were about to turn away, when a figure sprang out upon a rock, far up the stream, in the least accessible part of the glen. They all recognized Mr. Alvord, as he stood with folded arms and looked down on the flood that rushed by on either side of him. He had not seen them, and no greeting was possible above the sound of the waters. Webb thought, as he carried little Ned up the steep path, "Perhaps, in the mad current, he sees the counterpart of some period in his past."

The bridge across the mouth of Idlewild Brook was gone, and they next went to the landing. The main wharf was covered with large stones and gravel, the débris of the flood that had poured over it from the adjacent stream, whose natural outlet had been wholly inadequate. Then they drove to the wild and beautiful Mountainville road, that follows the Moodna Creek for a long distance. They could not proceed very far, however, for they soon came to a place where a tiny brook had passed under a wooden bridge. Now there was a great yawning chasm. Not only the bridge, but tons of earth were gone. The Moodna Creek, that had almost ceased to flow in the drought, had become a tawny river, and rushed by them with a sullen roar. Hanging over the tide was an old dead tree, on which was perched a fish-hawk. Even while they were looking at him, and Burt was wishing for his rifle, the bird swooped downward, plunged into the stream with a splash, and rose with a fish in his talons. It was an admirable exhibition of fearlessness and power, and Burt admitted that such a sportsman deserved to live.

CHAPTER XLIX.

ECHOES OF A PAST STORM.

MISS HARGROVE returned to dine with them, and as they were lingering over the dessert and coffee Webb remarked, "By the way, I think the poet Willis has given an account of a similar, or even greater, deluge in this region." He soon returned from the library, and read the following extracts: "'I do not see in the *Tribune* or other daily papers any mention of an event which occupies a whole column on the outside page of the highest mountain above West Point. An avalanche of earth and stone, which has seamed from summit to base the tall bluff that abuts upon the Hudson, forming a column of news visible for twenty miles, has reported a deluge we have had — a report a mile long, and much broader than Broadway.'"

"Certainly," said Mr. Clifford, "that's the flood of which I spoke yesterday. It was very local, but was much worse than the one we have just had. It occurred in August of '53. I remember now that Mr. Willis wrote a good deal about the affair in his letters from Idlewild. What else does he say?"

Webb, selecting here and there, continued to read: "'We have had a deluge in the valley immediately around us — a deluge which is shown by the overthrown farm buildings, the mills, dams, and bridges swept away, the well-built roads cut into chasms, the destruction of horses and cattle, and the imminent peril to life. It occurred on the evening of August 1, and a walk to-day down the valley which forms the thoroughfare to

Cornwall Landing (or, rather, a scramble over its gulfs in the road, its upset barns and sheds, its broken vehicles, drift lumber, rocks, and rubbish) would impress a stranger like a walk after the deluge of Noah.

"'The flood came upon us with scarce half an hour's notice. My venerable neighbor, of eighty years of age, who had passed his life here, and knows well the workings of the clouds among the mountains, had dined with us, but hastened his departure to get home before what looked like a shower, crossing with his feeble steps the stream whose strongest bridge, an hour after, was swept away. Another of our elderly neighbors had a much narrower escape. The sudden rush of water alarmed him for the safety of an old building he used for his stable, which stood upon the bank of the small stream usually scarce noticeable as it crosses the street at the landing. He had removed his horse, and returned to unloose a favorite dog, but before he could accomplish it the building fell. The single jump with which he endeavored to clear himself of the toppling rafters threw him into the torrent, and he was swept headlong towards the gulf which it had already torn in the wharf on the Hudson. His son and two others plunged in, and succeeded in snatching him from destruction. Another citizen was riding homeward, when the solid and strongly embanked road was swept away before and behind him, and he had barely time to unhitch his horse and escape, leaving his carriage islanded between the chasms. A man who was driving with his wife and child along our own wall on the river-shore had a yet more fearful escape: his horse suddenly forced to swim, and his wagon set afloat, and carried so violently against a tree by the swollen current of Idlewild Brook that he and his precious load were thrown into the water, and with difficulty reached the bank beyond. A party of children who were out huckleberrying on the mountain were separated from home by the swollen brook, and one of them was nearly drowned in vainly attempting to cross it. Their parents and friends were out all night in search of them. An aged farmer and his wife, who had been to Newburgh, and were returning with their two-horse wagon well laden with goods, attempted to drive over a bridge as it unsettled with the current, and were precipitated headlong. The old man caught a sapling as he went down with the flood, the old woman holding on to his coat-skirts, and so they struggled until their cries brought assistance.' Other and similar incidents are given. One large building was completely disembowelled, and the stream coursed violently between the two halves of its ruins. 'I was stopped,' he writes in another place, 'as I scrambled along the gorge, by a curious picture for the common highway. The brick front of the basement of a dwelling-house had been torn off, and the mistress of the house was on her hands and knees, with her head thrust in from a rear window, apparently getting her first look down into the desolated kitchen from which she had fled in the night. A man stood in the middle of the floor, up to his knees in water, looking round in dismay, though he had begun to pick up some of the overset chairs and utensils. The fireplace, with its interrupted supper arrangements, the dresser, with its plates and pans, its cups and saucers, the closets and cupboards, with their various stores and provisions, were all laid open to the road like a sliced watermelon.'"

"Well," ejaculated Leonard, "we haven't so much cause to complain, after hearing of an affair like that. I do remember many of my impressions at the time, now that the event is recalled so vividly, but have forgotten how so sudden a flood was accounted for."

"Willis speaks of it on another page," continued Webb, "as 'the aggregation of extensive masses of clouds into what is sometimes called a "water-spout," by the meeting of winds upon the converging edge of our bowl of highlands. The storm for a whole country was thus concentrated.' I think there must have been yesterday a far heavier fall of water on the mountains a little to the southeast than we had here. Perhaps the truer explanation in both instances would be that the winds brought heavy clouds together or against the mountains in such a way as to induce an enormous precipitation of vapor into rain. Mr. Willis indicates by the following passage the suddenness of the flood he describes: 'My first intimation that there was anything uncommon in the brook was the sight of a gentleman in a boat towing a cow across the meadow under our library window — a green glade seldom or never flooded. The roar from the foaming precipices in the glen had been heard by us all, but was thought to be thunder.' Then he tells how he and his daughter put on their rubber suits and hastened into the glen. 'The chasm,' he writes, 'in which the brook, in any freshet I had heretofore seen, was still only a deep-down stream, now seemed too small for the torrent. Those giddy precipices on which the sky seems to lean as you stand below were the foam-lashed sides of a full and mighty river. The spray broke through the tops of the full-grown willows and lindens. As the waves plunged against the cliffs they parted, and disclosed the trunks and torn branches of the large trees they had overwhelmed and were bearing away, and the earth-colored flood, in the wider places, was a struggling mass of planks, timber, rocks, and roots — tokens of a tumultuous ruin above, to which the thunder-shower pouring around us gave but a feeble clew. A heavy-limbed willow, which overhung a rock on which I had often sat to watch the freshets of spring, rose up while we looked at it, and with a surging heave, as if lifted by an earthquake, toppled back, and was swept rushingly away.' "

"How I would have liked to see it!" exclaimed Miss Hargrove.

"I can see it," said Amy, leaning back, and closing her eyes. "I can see it all too vividly. I don't like nature in such moods." Then she took up the volume, and began turning the leaves, and said: "I've never seen this book before. Why, it's all about this region, and written before I was born. Oh dear, here is another chapter of horrors!" and she read: "'Close to our gate, at the door of one of our nearest and most valued neighbors — a lovely girl was yesterday struck dead by lightning. A friend who stood with her at the moment was a greater sufferer, in being prostrated by the same flash, and paralyzed from the waist downward — her life spared at the cost of tortures inexpressible.' "

Webb reached out his hand to take the book from her, but she sprang aloof, and with dilating eyes read further: " 'Miss Gilmour had been chatting with a handsome boy admirer, but left him to take aside a confidential friend that she might read her a letter. It was from her mother, a widow with this only daughter. They passed out of the gate, crossed the road to be out of hearing, and stood under the telegraph wire, when the letter was opened. Her lips were scarce parted to read when the flash came — an arrow of intense light — ' Oh, horrible! horrible! How can you blame me for fear in a thunderstorm?"

"Amy," said Webb, now quietly taking the book, "your dread at such times is constitutional. If there were need, you could face danger as well as any of us. You would have all a woman's fortitude, and that surpasses ours. Take the world over, the danger from lightning is exceedingly slight, and it's not the danger that makes you tremble, but your nervous organization."

"You interpret me kindly," she said, "but I don't see why nature is so full of horrible things. If Gertrude had been bitten by the snake, she might have fared even worse than the poor girl of whom I have read."

Miss Hargrove could not forbear a swift, grateful glance at Burt.

"I do not think nature is *full* of horrible things," Webb resumed. "Remember how many showers have cooled the air and made the earth beautiful and fruitful in this region. In no other instance that I know anything about has life been destroyed in our vicinity. There is indeed a side to nature that is full of mystery — the old dark mystery of evil; but I should rather say it is full of all that is beautiful and helpful. At least this seems true of our region. I have never seen so much beauty in all my life as during the past year, simply because I am forming the habit of looking for it."

"Why, Webb," exclaimed Amy, laughing, "I thought your mind was concentrating on crops and subjects as deep as the ocean."

"It would take all the salt of the ocean to save that remark," he replied; but he beat a rather hasty retreat.

"Well, Amy," said Mr. Clifford, "you may now dismiss your fears. I imagine that in our tropical storm summer has passed; and with it thunder-showers and sudden floods. We may now look forward to two months of almost ideal weather, with now and then a day that will make a book and a wood fire all the more alluring."

The old gentleman's words proved true. The days passed like bright smiles, in which, however, lurked the pensiveness of autumn. Slowly failing maples glowed first with the hectic flush of disease, but gradually warmer hues stole into the face of Nature, for it is the dying of the leaves that causes the changes of color in the foliage.

CHAPTER L.

IMPULSES OF THE HEART.

THE fall season brought increased and varied labors on the farm and in the garden. As soon as the ground was dry after the tremendous storm, and its ravages had been repaired as far as possible, the ploughs were busy preparing for winter grain, turnips were thinned out, winter cabbages and cauliflowers cultivated, and the succulent and now rapidly growing celery earthed up. The fields of corn were watched, and as fast as the kernels within the husks — now becoming golden-hued — were glazed, the stalks were cut and tied in compact shocks. The sooner maize is cut, after it has sufficiently matured, the better, for the leaves make more nutritious fodder if cured or dried while still full of sap. From some fields the shocks were wholly removed, that the land might be ploughed and seeded with grain and grass. Buckwheat, used merely as a green and scavenger crop, was ploughed under as it came into blossom, and that which was sown to mature was cut in the early morning, while the dew was still upon it, for in the heat of the day the grain shells easily, and is lost. After drying for a few days in compact little heaps it was ready for the threshing-machine. Then the black, angular kernels — promises of many winter breakfasts — were spread to dry on the barn floor, for if thrown into heaps or bins at this early stage, they heat badly.

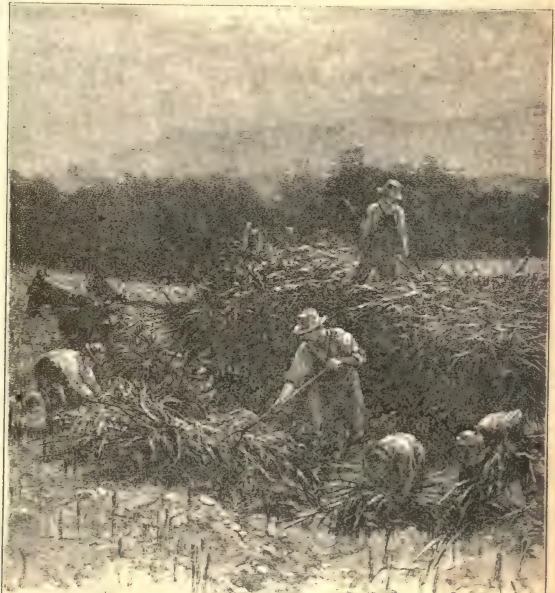
The Cliffords had long since learned that the large late peaches, that mature after the Southern crop is out of the market, are the most profitable, and almost every day Abram took to the landing a load of baskets full of downy beauties. An orange grove, with its deep green foliage and golden fruit, is beautiful indeed, but an orchard laden with Crawford's Late, in their best development, can well sustain comparison. Sharing the honors and attention given to the peaches were the Bartlett and other early pears. These latter fruits were treated in much the same way as the former. The trees were picked over every few days, and the largest and ripest specimens taken, their maturity being indicated by the readiness of the stem to part from the spray when the pear is lifted. The greener and imperfect fruit was left to develop, and the trees, relieved of much of their burden, were able to concentrate their forces on what was left. The earlier red grapes, including the Delaware, Brighton, and Agawam, not only furnished the table abundantly, but also a large surplus for market. Indeed, there was high and dainty feasting at the Cliffords' every day — fruit everywhere, hanging temptingly within reach, with its delicate bloom untouched, untarnished.

The storm and the seasonable rains that followed soon restored its fulness and beauty to Nature's withered face. The drought had brought to vegetation partial rest and extension of root growth, and now, with the abundance of moisture, there was almost a spring-like revival. The grass sprang up afresh, meadows and fields grew green, and annual weeds, from seeds that had matured in August, appeared by the million.

"I am glad to see them," Webb remarked. "Before they can mature any seed the frost will put an end to their career of mischief, and there will be so many seeds less to grow next spring."

"There'll be plenty left," Leonard replied.

The Cliffords, by their provident system of culture, had prepared for droughts as mariners do for storms, and hence they had not suffered so greatly as others; but busy as they were kept by the autumnal bounty of Nature, and the rewards of their own industry, they found time for recreation, and thoughts far removed from the material questions of profit and loss. The drama of life went on, and feeling, conviction, and love matured like the ripening fruits, although not so openly. As soon as his duties permitted, Burt took a rather abrupt departure for a hunting expedition in the northern woods, and a day or two



HARVESTING.

later Amy received a note from Miss Hargrove, saying that she had accepted an invitation to join a yachting party.

"Oh, Webb!" she exclaimed, "I wish you were not so awfully busy all the time. Here I am, thrown wholly on your tender mercies, and I am neither a crop nor a scientific subject."

He gave her little reason for complaint. The increasing coolness and exhilarating vitality of the air made not only labor agreeable, but out-door sports delightful, and he found time for an occasional gallop, drive, or ramble along roads and lanes lined with golden-rod and purple asters; and these recreations had no other drawback than the uncertainty and anxiety within his heart. The season left nothing to be desired, but the outer world, even in its perfection, is only an accompaniment of human life, which is often in sad discord with it.

Nature, however, is a harmony of many and varied strains, and the unhappy are always conscious of a deep minor key even on the brightest days. To Alf and Johnnie the fall brought unalloyed joy and promise; to those who were older, something akin to melancholy, which deepened with the autumn of their life; while to Mr. Alvord every breeze was a sigh, every rising wind a mournful requiem, and every trace of change a reminder that his spring and summer had passed forever, leaving only a harvest of bitter memories. Far different was the dreamy pensiveness with which Mr. and Mrs. Clifford looked back upon their vanished youth and maturity. At the same time they felt within themselves the beginnings of an immortal youth. Although it was late autumn with them, not memory, but hope, was in the ascendant.

During damp or chilly days, and on the evenings of late September, the fire burned cheerily on the hearth of their Franklin stove. The old gentleman had a curious fancy in regard to his fire-wood. He did not want the straight, shapely sticks from their mountain land, but gnarled and crooked billets, cut from trees about the place that had required pruning and removal.

"I have associations with such fuel," he said, "and can usually recall the trees — many of which I planted — from which it came; and as I watch it burn and turn into coals, I see pictures of what happened many years ago."

One evening he threw on the fire a worm-eaten billet, the sound part of which was as red as mahogany; then drew Amy to him and said, "I once sat with your father under the apple-tree of which that piece of wood was a part, and I can see him now as he then looked."

She sat down beside him, and said, softly, "Please tell me how he looked."

In simple words the old man portrayed the autumn day, the fruit as golden as the sunshine, a strong, hopeful man, who had passed away in a far-distant land, but who was still a living presence to both. Amy looked at the picture in the flickering blaze until her eyes were blinded with tears. But such drops fall on the heart like rain and dew, producing richer and more beautiful life.

The pomp and glory of October were ushered in by days of such surpassing balminess and brightness that it was felt to be a sin to remain in-doors. The grapes had attained their deepest purple, and the apples in the orchard vied with the brilliant and varied hues of the fast-turning foliage. The nights were soft, warm, and resonant with the unchecked piping of insects. From every tree and shrub the katydids contradicted one another with increasing emphasis, as if conscious that the time was at hand when the last word must be spoken. The stars glimmered near through a delicate haze, and in the western sky the pale crescent of the moon was so inclined that the old Indian might have hung upon it his powder-horn.

On such an evening the young people from the Cliffords' had gathered on Mr. Hargrove's piazza, and Amy and Gertrude were looking at the new moon with silver in their pockets, each making her silent wish. What were those wishes? Amy had to think before deciding what she wanted most, but not Miss

Hargrove. Her face has grown thinner and paler during the last few weeks; there is unwonted brilliancy in her eyes to-night, but her expression is resolute. Her wish and her hope were at variance. Times of weakness, if such they could be called, would come, but they should not appear in Burt's or Amy's presence.

The former had just returned, apparently gayer than ever. His face was bronzed from his out-door life in the Adirondacks. Its expression was also resolute, and his eyes turned oftenest towards Amy, with a determined loyalty. As has been said, not long after the experiences following the storm, he had yielded to his impulse to go away and recover his poise. He felt that if he continued to see Miss Hargrove frequently he might reveal a weakness which would lead not only Amy to despise him, but also Miss Hargrove, should she become aware of the past. As he often took such outings, the family, with the exception of Webb and Amy, thought nothing of it. His brother and the girl he had wooed so passionately now understood him well enough to surmise his motive, and Amy had thought, "It will do him good to go away and think awhile, but it will make no difference; this new affair must run its course also." And yet her heart began to relent towards him after a sisterly fashion. She wondered if Miss Hargrove did regard him as other than a friend to whom she owed very much. If so, she smiled at the idea of standing in the way of their mutual happiness. She had endured his absence with exceeding tranquillity, for Webb had given her far more of his society, and she, Alf, and Johnnie often went out and aided him in gathering the fruit. For some reason these light tasks had been more replete with quiet enjoyment than deliberate pleasure-seeking.

Burt had been at pains to take, in Amy's presence, a most genial and friendly leave of Miss Hargrove, but there was no trace of the lover in his manner. His smiles and cordial words had chilled her heart, and had strengthened the fear that in some way he was bound to Amy. She knew that she had fascinated and perhaps touched him deeply, but imagined she saw indications of an allegiance that gave little hope for the future. If he felt as she did, and were free, he would not have gone away; and when he had gone, time grew leaden-footed. Absence is the touchstone, and by its test she knew that her father was right, and that she, to whom so much love had been given unrequited, had bestowed hers apparently in like manner. Then had come an invitation to join a yachting party to Fortress Monroe, and she had eagerly accepted. With the half-reckless impulse of pride, she had resolved to throw away the dream that had promised so much, and yet had ended in such bitter and barren reality. She would forget it all in one brief whirl of gayety; and she had been the brilliant life of the party. But how often her laugh had ended in a stifled sigh! How often her heart told her, "This is not happiness, and never can be again"! Her brief experience of what is deep and genuine in life taught her that she had outgrown certain pleasures of the past, as a child outgrows its toys, and she had returned thoroughly convinced that her remedy was not in the dissipations of society.

The evening after her return Burt, with Webb and Amy, had come to call, and as she looked upon him again she asked herself, in sadness, "Is there any remedy?" She was not one to give her heart in a half-way manner.

It seemed to her that he had been absent for years, and had grown indefinitely remote. Never before had she gained the impression so strongly that he was in some way bound to Amy, and would abide by his choice. If this were true, she felt that the sooner she left the vicinity the better, and even while she chatted lightly and genially she was planning to induce her father to return to the city at an early date. Before parting, Amy spoke of her pleasure at the return of her friend, who, she said, had been greatly missed, adding: "Now we shall make up for lost time. The roads are in fine condition for horseback exercise, nutting expeditions will soon be in order, and we have a bee-hunt on the programme."

"I congratulate you on your prospects," said Miss Hargrove. "I wish I could share in all your fun, but fear I shall soon return to the city."

Burt felt a sudden chill at these words, and a shadow from them fell across his face. Webb saw their effect, and he at once entered on a rather new *rôle* for him. "Then we must make the most of the time before you go," he began. "I propose we take advantage of this weather and drive over to West Point, and lunch at Fort Putnam."

"Why, Webb, what a burst of genius!" Amy exclaimed. "Nothing could be more delightful. Let us go to-morrow, for we can't count on such weather long."

Miss Hargrove hesitated. The temptation was indeed strong, but she felt it would not be wise to yield, and began, hesitatingly, "I fear my engagements — " At this moment she caught a glimpse of Burt's face in a mirror, and saw the look of disappointment which he could not disguise. "If I return to the city soon," she resumed, "I ought to be at my preparations."

"Why, Gertrude," said Amy, "I almost feel as if you did not wish to go. Can't you spare one day? I thought you were to remain in the country till November. I have been planning so much that we could do together!"

"Surely, Miss Hargrove," added Burt, with a slight tremor in his voice, "you cannot nip Webb's genius in the very bud. Such an expedition as he proposes is an inspiration."

"But you can do without me," she replied, smiling on him bewilderingly.

It was a light arrow, but its aim was true. Never before had he so felt the power of her beauty, the almost irresistible spell of her fascination. While her lips were smiling, there was an expression in her dark eyes that made her words, so simple and natural in themselves, a searching question, and he could not forbear saying, earnestly, "We should all enjoy the excursion far more if you went with us."

"Truly, Miss Hargrove," said Webb, "I shall be quenched if you decline, and feel that I have none of the talent for which I was beginning to gain a little credit."

"I cannot resist such an appeal as that, Mr. Clifford," she said, laughingly.

"This is perfectly splendid!" cried Amy. "I anticipate a marvellous day to-morrow. Bring Fred also, and let us all vie with each other in encouraging Webb."

"Has that quiet Webb any scheme in his mind?" Miss Hargrove thought, after they had gone. "I wish that to-morrow might indeed be 'a marvellous day' for us all."

"*Can* I do without her?" was poor Burt's query. An affirmative answer was slow in coming, though he thought long and late.

CHAPTER LI.

WEBB'S FATEFUL EXPEDITION.

MR. HARGROVE had welcomed the invitation that took his daughter among some of her former companions, hoping that a return to brilliant fashionable life would prove to her that she could not give it up. It was his wish that she should marry a wealthy man of the city. His wife did not dream of any other future for her handsome child, and she looked forward with no little complacency to the ordering of a new and elegant establishment.

At the dinner-table Gertrude had given a vivacious account of her yachting experience, and all had appeared to promise well; but when she went to the library to kiss her father good-night, he looked at her inquiringly, and said, "You enjoyed every moment, I suppose?"

She shook her head sadly, and, after a moment, said: "I fear I've grown rather tired of that kind of thing. We made much effort to enjoy ourselves. Is there not a happiness which comes without so much effort?"

"I'm sorry," he said, simply.

"Perhaps you need not be. Suppose I find more pleasure in staying with you than in rushing around?"

"That would not last. That is contrary to nature."

"I think it would be less contrary to *my* nature than forced gayety among people I care nothing about."

He smiled at her fondly, but admitted to himself that absence had confirmed the impressions of the summer, instead of dissipating them, and that if Burt became her suitor he would be accepted.

When she looked out on the morning of the excursion to Fort Putnam it was so radiant with light and beauty that hope sprang up within her heart. Disappointment that might last through life could not come on a day like this. Silvery mists ascended from the river down among the Highlands. The lawn and many of the fields were as green as they had been in June, and on every side were trees like immense bouquets, so rich and varied was their coloring. There was a dewy freshness in the air, a genial warmth in the sunshine, a spring-like blue in the sky; and in these was no suggestion that the November of her life was near. "And yet it may be," she thought. "I must soon face my fate, and I must be true to Amy."

Mrs. Hargrove regarded with discontent the prospect of another long mountain expedition; but Fred, her idol, was wild for it, and in a day or two he must return to school in the city, from which, at his earnest plea, he had been absent too long already; so she smiled her farewell at last upon the fateful excursion.

He, with his sister, was soon at the Cliffords', and found the rockaway — the strong old carryall with which Gertrude already had tender associations — in readiness. Maggie had agreed to chaperon the party, little Ned having been easily bribed to remain with his father.

Miss Hargrove had looked wistfully at the Clifford mansion as she drew near to it. Never had it appeared to her more home-like, with its embowering trees and laden orchards. The bright hues of the foliage suggested the hopes that centred there: the ocean, as she had seen it — cold and gray under a clouded sky — was emblematic of life with no fulfilment of those hopes. And when Mr. Clifford met her at the door, and took her in to see the invalid, who greeted her almost as affectionately as she would have welcomed Amy after absence, Miss

Hargrove knew in the depths of her heart how easily she could be at home there.

Never did a pleasure-party start under brighter auspices. Even Mrs. Clifford came out, on her husband's arm, to wave them a farewell.

The young men had their alpenstocks, for it was their intention to walk up the steep places. Webb was about to take Alf and Johnnie on the front seat with him, when Amy exclaimed: "I'm going to drive, Mr. Webb. Johnnie can sit between us, and keep me company when you are walking. You needn't think that because you are the brilliant author of this expedition you are going to have everything your own way."

Indeed, not a little guile lurked behind her laughing eyes, which ever kept Webb in perplexity — though he looked into them so often — as to whether they were blue or gray. Miss Hargrove demurely took her seat with Maggie, and Burt had the two boys with him. Fred had brought his gun, and was vigilant for game now that the "law was up."

They soon reached the foot of the mountain, and there was a general unloading, for at first every one wished to walk. Maggie good-naturedly climbed around to the front seat and took the reins, remarking that she would soon have plenty of company again.

Burt had not recognized Amy's tactics, nor did he at once second them, even unconsciously. His long ruminations had led to the only possible conclusion — the words he had spoken must be made good. Pride and honor permitted no other course. Therefore he proposed to-day to be ubiquitous, and as gallant to Maggie as to the younger ladies. When Miss Hargrove returned to the city he would quietly prove his loyalty. Never before had he appeared in such spirits; never so inexorably resolute. He recalled Amy's incredulous laugh at his protestation of constancy, and felt that he could never look her in the face if he faltered. It was known that Miss Hargrove had received much attention, and her interest in him would be likely to disappear at once should she learn of his declaration of undying devotion to another but a few months before. He anathematized himself, but determined that his weakness should remain unknown. It was evident that Amy had been a little jealous, but probably that she did not yet care enough for him to be very sensitive on the subject. This made no difference, however. He had pledged himself to wait until she did care. Therefore he sedulously maintained his mask. Miss Hargrove should be made to believe that she had added much to the pleasure of the excursion, and there he would stop. And Burt on his mettle was no bungler. The test would come in his staying powers.

Webb, however, was quietly serene. He had not watched and thought so long in vain. He had seen Burt's expression the evening before, and knew that a wakeful night had followed. His own feeling had taught him a clairvoyance which enabled him to divine not a little of what was passing in his brother's mind and that of Miss Hargrove. Amy troubled him more than they. Her frank, sisterly affection was not love, and might never become love.

One of the objects of the expedition was to obtain an abundant supply of autumn leaves and ferns for pressing. "I intend to make the old house look like a bower this winter," Amy remarked.

"That would be impossible with our city home," Miss Hargrove said, "and mamma would not hear of such an attempt. But I can do as I please in my own room, and shall gather my country *souvenirs* to-day."

The idea of decorating her apartment with feathery ferns and bright-hued leaves took a strong hold upon her fancy, for she hoped that Burt would aid her in making the collection. Nor was she disappointed, for Amy said:

"Burt, I have gathered and pressed nearly all the ferns I need already. You know the shady nooks where the most delicate ones grow, and you can help Gertrude make as good a collection as mine. You'll help too, won't you, Webb?" added the innocent little schemer, who saw that Burt was looking at her rather keenly.

So they wound up the mountain, making long stops here and there to gather sylvan trophies and to note the fine views. Amy's manner was so cordial and natural that Burt's suspicions had been allayed, and the young fellow, who could do nothing by halves, was soon deeply absorbed in making a superb collection for Miss Hargrove, and she felt that, whatever happened, she was being enriched by everything he obtained for her. Amy had brought a great many newspapers folded together so that leaves could be placed between the pages, and Webb soon noted that his offerings were kept separate from those of Burt. The latter tried to be impartial in his labors in behalf of the two girls, bringing Amy bright-hued leaves instead of ferns, but did not wholly succeed, and sometimes he found himself alone with Miss Hargrove as they pursued their search a short distance on some diverging and shaded path. On one of these occasions he said, "I like to think how beautiful you will make your room this winter."

"I like to think of it too," she replied. "I shall feel that I have a part of my pleasant summer always present."

"Has it been a pleasant summer?"

"Yes, the pleasantest I ever enjoyed."

"I should think you would find it exceedingly dull after such brilliant experiences as that of your yachting excursion."

"Do you find to-day exceedingly dull?"

"But I am used to the quiet country, and a day like this is the exception."

"I do not imagine you have ever lived a tame life."

"Isn't that about the same as calling me wild?"

"There's no harm in beginning a little in that way. Time sobers one fast enough."

"You are so favored that I can scarcely imagine life bringing sobering experiences to you very soon."

"Indeed? Have you forgotten what occurred on these very mountains, at no great distance? I assure you I never forget it;" and her eyes were eloquent as she turned them upon him.

"One does not forget the most fortunate event of one's life. Since you were to meet that danger, I would not have missed being near for the world. I had even a narrower escape, as you know, on this mountain. The spot where Webb found me is scarcely more than a mile away."

She looked at him very wistfully, and her face grew pale, but she only said, "I don't think either of us can forget the Highlands."

"I shall never forget that little path," he said, in a low tone, and he looked back at it lingeringly as they came out into the road and approached the rest of the party.

"Have you lost anything, Burt?" cried Amy, laughing.

"No, but I've found something. See this superb bunch of maiden hair. That spot should be marked for future supplies. Miss Hargrove will share with you, for you can't have anything so fine as this."

"Yes, indeed I have, and I shall call you and Webb to account if you do not to-day make Gertrude fare as well."

Both Miss Hargrove and Burt were bewildered. There was lurking mischief in Amy's eyes when she first spoke, and yet she used her influence to keep Burt in her friend's society. Her spirits seemed too exuberant to be natural, and Miss Hargrove, who was an adept at hiding her feelings under a mask of gayety, surmised that Amy's feminine instincts had taught her to employ the same tactics. Conscious of their secret, Miss Hargrove and Burt both thought, "Perhaps it is her purpose to throw us together as far as possible, and learn the truth."

Amy had a kinder purpose than they imagined. She wanted no more of Burt's forced allegiance, and was much too good-natured to permit mere pique to cause unhappiness to others. "Let Gertrude win him if she cares for him," was her thought, "and if *she* can't hold him his case is *hopeless*." She could not resist the temptation, however, to tease Burt a little.

But he gave her slight chance for the next few hours. Her mirthful question and the glance accompanying it had put him on his guard again, and he at once became the gay cavalier-general he had resolved on being throughout the day.

They made a long pause to enjoy the view looking out upon Constitution Island, West Point, the southern mountains, and the winding river, dotted here and there with sails, and with steamers, seemingly held motionless by their widely separated train of canal boats.

"What mountain is this that we are now to descend?" Miss Hargrove asked.

"Cro' Nest," Burt replied. "It's the first high mountain that abuts on the river above West Point, you will remember."

"Oh, yes, I remember. I have a song relating to it, and will give you a verse;" and she sang:

"'Where Hudson's waves o'er silvery sands
Wind through the hills afar,
And Cro' Nest like a monarch stands,
Crowned with a single star.'"

After a round of applause had subsided, Burt, whose eyes had been more demonstrative than his hands, said, "That's by Morris. We can see from Fort Putnam his old home under Mount Taurus."

"I know. He is the poet who entreated the woodman to 'spare that tree.'"

"Which the woodman will never do," Webb remarked, "unless compelled by law; nor even then, I fear."

"Oh, Webb!" cried Amy, "with what a thump you drop into prose!"

"I also advise an immediate descent of the mountain if we are to have any time at Fort Putnam," he added. "I'll walk on."

They were soon winding down the S's by which the road overcame the steep declivity. On reaching a plateau, before the final descent, they came across a wretched hovel, gray and storm-beaten, with scarcely strength to stand. Rags took the place of broken glass in the windows. A pig was rooting near the door-step, on which stood a slatternly woman, regarding the party with dull curiosity.

"Talk about the elevating influence of mountain scenery!" said Miss Hargrove; "there's a commentary on the theory."

"The theory's correct," persisted Burt. "Their height above tide-water and the amount of bad whiskey they consume keep our mountaineers elevated most of the time."

"Does Lumley live in a place like that?" Miss Hargrove asked.

"He did — in a worse one, if possible," Webb replied for Amy, who hesitated. "But you should see how it is changed. He now has a good vegetable garden fenced in, a rustic porch covered with American ivy, and — would you believe it? — an actual flower-bed. Within the hut there are two pictures on the wall, and the baby creeps on a carpeted floor. Lumley says Amy is making a man of him."

"You forget to mention how much you have helped me," Amy added.

"Come, let us break up this mutual admiration society," said Burt. "I'm ready for lunch already, and Fort Putnam is miles away."

The road from the foot of the mountain descends gradually through wild, beautiful scenery to West Point. Cro' Nest rises abruptly on the left, and there is a wooded valley on the right, with mountains beyond. The trees overhung the road with a canopy of gold, emerald, and crimson foliage, and the sunlight came to the excursionists as through stained-glass windows. Taking a side street at the back of the military post, they soon reached a point over which frowned the ruins of the fort, and here they left their horses. After a brief climb to the northward they entered on an old road, grass-grown and leaf-carpeted, and soon passed through the gaping sally-port, on either side of which cone-like cedars stood as sentinels. Within the fort Nature had been busy for a century softening and obliterating the work of man. Cedar-trees — some of which were dying from age — grew everywhere, even on the crumbling ramparts. Except where ledges of the native rock cropped out, the ground was covered with a thick sward. Near the centre of the enclosure is the rocky basin. In it bubbles the spring at which the more temperate of the ancient garrison may have softened the asperities of their New England rum.

The most extensive ruins are seen by turning sharply to the left from the sally-port. Here, yawning like caverns, their entrances partially choked by the *dèbris*, are six casemates, or vaults. They were built of brick, covered with stone, and are eighteen feet deep and twelve wide, with an arched roof twelve feet high. On the level rampart above them were long, withered grass, the wild dwarf-rose, and waving golden-rod. The outer walls, massy and crumbling, or half torn away by Vandal hands, were built in angles, according to the engineering science of the Revolution, except on the west, where the high ramparts surmount a mural perpendicular precipice fifty feet in height. Inland, across the valley, the mountains were seen, rising like rounded billows in every direction, while from the north, east, and south the windings of the Hudson were visible for fifteen miles.

All but Amy had visited the spot before, and Burt explored the place with her while the rest prepared for lunch. She had asked Gertrude to accompany them, but the latter had sought refuge with Maggie, and at her side she proposed to remain. She scarcely dared trust herself with Burt, and as the day advanced he certainly permitted his eyes to express an interest that promised ill for his inexorable purpose of constancy.

It had become clear to Miss Hargrove that he was restrained by something that had occurred between him and Amy, and both her pride and her sense of truth to her friend decided her to withdraw as far as possible from his society, and to return to the city.

She and Burt vied with each other in gayety at lunch. When it was over they all grouped themselves in the shade of a clump of cedars, and looked away upon the wide prospect, Webb pointing out objects of past and present interest. Alf and Fred speedily grew restless and started off with the gun, Johnnie's head sank into her mother's lap, Miss Hargrove and Burt grew quiet and pre-occupied, their eyes looking off into vacancy. Webb was saying, " By one who had imagination how much more could be seen from this point than meets the eye ! There, on the plain below us, would rise the magnificent rustic colonnade two hundred and twenty feet long and eighty feet wide, beneath which Washington gave the great banquet in honor of the birth of the Dauphin of France, and on the evening of the same day these hills blazed with musketry and rolled back the thunder of cannon with which the festivities of the evening were begun. Think of the ' Father of his Country ' being there in flesh and blood, just as we are here ! In the language of an old military journal, 'He carried down a dance of twenty couple on the green grass, with a graceful and dignified air, having Mrs. Knox for his partner.' In almost a direct line across the river you can see the Beverly Robinson house, from which Arnold carried on his correspondence with André. You can look into the window of the room to which, after hearing of the capture of André, he hastened from the breakfast-table. To this upper room he immediately summoned his wife, who had been the beautiful Margaret Shippen, you remember, and told her of his awful peril, then rushed away, leaving the poor, terror-stricken woman unconscious on the floor. Would you not like to look through the glass at the house where the tragedy occurred, Miss Hargrove ? "

At the sound of her name the young girl started visibly, and Webb saw that there were tears in her eyes ; but she complied without a word, and he so directed the glass that it covered the historic mansion.

"How full of sensibility she is!" thought innocent Webb, taking her quickly suppressed emotion as a tribute to his moving reminiscences.

"Oh, Webb, have done with your lugubrious ancient history!" cried Burt, springing up.

"It's time we were getting ready for a homeward move," said Maggie. "I'll go and pack the things."

"And I'll help you," added Miss Hargrove, hastily following her.

"Let me look at the house, too," said Amy, taking the glass; then added, after a moment: "Poor Margaret Arnold! It was indeed a tragedy, as you said, Webb — a sadder one than these old military preparations can suggest. In all his career of war and treachery Arnold never inflicted a more cruel wound."

"How much feeling Miss Hargrove showed!" Webb remarked, musingly.

"Yes," said Amy, quietly, "she was evidently feeling deeply." Her thought was, "I don't believe she heard a word that Webb said." Then, seeing that Burt was helping Maggie and Miss Hargrove, she added, "Please point out to me some other interesting places."

Webb, well pleased, talked on to a listener who did not give him her whole attention. She could not forget Gertrude's paleness, and her alternations from extreme gayety to a look of such deep sadness as to awaken not a little sympathetic curiosity. Amy loved her friend truly, and it did not seem strange to her that Miss Hargrove was deeply interested in Burt, since they had been much thrown together, and since she probably owed her life to him. Amy's resentment towards Burt had passed away. She had found that her pride, merely, and not her heart, was wounded by his new passion, and she already began to feel that she never could have any such regard for him as her friend was possibly cherishing. Therefore it was, perhaps, not unnatural that her tranquil regard should prove unsatisfying to Burt in contrast with the passion of which Miss Hargrove was capable. She had seen his vain efforts to remain loyal, and had smiled at them, proposing to let matters take their course, and to give little aid in extricating him from his dilemma. But, if she had interpreted her friend's face aright, she could no longer stand aloof, an amused and slightly satirical spectator. If Burt deserved some punishment, Gertrude did not, and she was inclined to guess the cause of the latter's haste to return to the city.

It may thus be seen that Amy was fast losing her unsophisticated girlhood. While Burt's passionate words had awakened no corresponding feeling, they had taught her that she was no longer a child, since she could inspire such words. Her intimacy with Miss Hargrove, and the latter's early confidences, had enlarged her ideas on some subjects. As the bud of a flower passes slowly through long and apparently slow stages of immaturity and at last suddenly opens to the light, so she had reached that age when a little experience suggests a great deal, and the influences around her tended to develop certain thoughts very rapidly. She saw that her friend had not been brought up in English seclusion. Admirers by the score had flocked around her, and, as she had often said, she proposed to marry for love. "I have the name of being cold," she once told Amy, "but I know I can love as can few others, and I shall know it well when I do love, too." The truth was daily growing clearer to Amy that under our vivid American skies the grand passion is not a fiction of romance or a quiet arrangement between the parties concerned.

Miss Hargrove had not misjudged herself. Her tropical nature, when once kindled, burned with no feeble, wavering flame. She had passed the point of criticism of Burt. She loved him, and to her fond eyes he seemed more worthy of her love than any man she had ever before known. But she had not passed beyond her sense of truth and duty, and the feeling came to her that she must go away at once and engage in that most pathetic of all struggles that fall to woman's lot. As the conviction grew clear on this bright October day, she felt that her heart was bleeding internally. Tears would come into her eyes at the dreary prospect. Her former brilliant society life now looked as does an opera-house in the morning, when the gilding and tinsel that flashed and sparkled the evening before are seen to be dull and tarnished. Burt had appeared to especial advantage in his mountain home. He excelled in all manly sports. His tall, fine figure and unconscious, easy manner were as full of grace as deficient in conventionality, and she thought with disgust of many of her former admirers, who were nothing if not stylish after the arbitrary mode of the hour. At the same time he had proved that he could be at home in a drawing-room on the simple ground of good-breeding, and not because he had been run through fashion's latest mould. The grand scenery around her suggested the manhood that kindled her imagination — a manhood strong, fearless, and not degenerated from that sturdy age which had made these scenes historic.

By the time they were ready to start homeward the southern side of Cro' Nest was in deep blue shadow. They bowled along rapidly till they came to the steep ascent, and then the boys and the young men sprang out. "Would you like to walk, Gertrude?" Amy asked, for she was bent on throwing her friend and Burt together during the witching twilight that was coming on apace.

"I fear I am too tired, unless the load is heavy," she replied.

"Oh, no, indeed," said Webb. "It does not take long to reach the top of the mountain on this side, and then it's chiefly down hill the rest of the way."

Amy, who had been sitting with Webb and Johnnie as before, said to Miss Hargrove, "Won't you step across the seats and keep me company?"

She complied, but not willingly. She was so utterly unhappy that she wished to be left to herself as far as possible. In her realization of a loss that seemed immeasurable, she was a little resentful towards Amy, feeling that she had been more frank and confidential than her friend. If Amy had claims on Burt, why had she not spoken of them? why had she permitted her for whom she professed such strong friendship to drift almost wholly unwarned upon so sad a fate? and why was she now clearly trying to bring together Burt and the one to whom even he felt that he had no right to speak in more than a friendly manner? While she was making such immense sacrifices to be true, she felt that Amy was maintaining an unfair reticence, if not actually beguiling herself and Burt into a display of weakness for which they would be condemned — or, at least, he would be, and love identifies itself with its object. These thoughts, having once been admitted, grew upon her mind rapidly, for it is hard to suffer through another and maintain a gentle charity. Therefore she was silent when she took her seat by Amy, and when the latter gave her a look that was like a caress, she did not return it.

"You are tired, Gertrude," Amy began, gently. "Indeed, you look ill. You must stay with me to-night, and I'll watch over you like Sairy Gamp."

So far from responding to Amy's playful and friendly words, Miss Hargrove said, hastily,

"Oh, no, I had better go right on home. I don't feel very well, and shall be better at home; and I must begin to get ready to-morrow for my return to the city."

Amy would not be repulsed, but, putting her arm around her friend, she looked into her eyes, and asked:

"Why are you so eager to return to New York? Are you tiring of your country friends? You certainly told me that you expected to stay till November."

"Fred must go back to school to-morrow," said Gertrude, in a constrained voice, "and I do not think it is well to leave him alone in the city house."

"You are withdrawing your confidence from me," said Amy, sadly.

"Have you ever truly given me yours?" was the low, impetuous response. "No. If you had, I should not be the unhappy girl I am to-night. Well, since you wish to know the whole truth you shall. You said you could trust me implicitly, and I promised to deserve your trust. If you had said to me that Burt was bound to you when I told you that I was heart-whole and fancy-free, I should have been on my guard. Is it natural that I should be indifferent to the man who risked his life to save mine? Why have you left me so long in his society without a hint of warning? But I shall keep my word. I shall not try to snatch happiness from another."

Johnnie's tuneful little voice was piping a song, and the rumble of the wheels over a stony road prevented Maggie, on the last seat, from hearing anything.

The clasp of Amy's arm tightened. "Now you *shall* stay with me to-night," she said. "I cannot explain here and now. See, Burt has turned, and is coming towards us. I pledge you my word he can never be to me more than a brother. I do not love him except as a brother, and never have, and you can snatch no happiness from me, except by treating me with distrust and going away."

"Oh, Amy," began Miss Hargrove, in tones and with a look that gave evidence of the chaotic bewilderment of her mind.

"Hush! We are not very lonely, thank you, Mr. Burt. You look, as far as I can see you through the dusk, as if you were commiserating us as poor forlorn creatures, but we have some resources within ourselves."

"The dusk is, indeed, misleading. We are the forlorn creatures who have no resources. Won't you please take us in?"

"Take you in! What do you take us for? I assure you we are very simple, honest people."

"In that case I shall have no fears, but clamber in at once. I feel as if I had been on a twenty-mile tramp."

"What an implied compliment to our exhilarating society!"

"Indeed there is — a very strong one. I've been so immensely exhilarated that, in the re-action, I'm almost faint."

"Maggie," cried Amy, "do take care of Burt; he's going to faint."

"He must wait till we come to the next brook, and then we'll put him in it."

"Webb," said Amy, looking over her shoulder at the young man, who was now following the carriage, "is there anything the matter with you, also?"

"Nothing more than usual."

"Oh, your trouble, whatever it may be, is chronic. Well, well, to think that we poor women may be the only survivors of this tremendous expedition."

"That would be most natural — the survival of the fittest, you know."

"I don't think your case serious. Science is uppermost in your mind, as ever. You ought to live a thousand years, Webb, to see the end of all your theories."

"I fear it wouldn't be the millennium for me, and that I should have more perplexing theories at its end than now."

"That's the way with men — they are never satisfied," remarked Miss Hargrove. "Mr. Clifford, this is your expedition, and it's getting so dark that I shall feel safer if you are driving."

"Oh, Gertrude, you have no confidence in me whatever. As if I would break your neck — or heart either!" Amy whispered in her friend's ear.

"You are a very mysterious little woman," was the reply, given in like manner, "and need hours of explanation." Then, to Webb: "Mr. Clifford, I've much more confidence in you than in Amy. Her talk is so giddy that I want a sober hand on the reins."

"To which Mr. Clifford do you refer?" asked Burt.

"Oh, are you reviving? I thought you had become unconscious."

"I'm not wholly past feeling."

"I want one to drive who can see his way, not feel it," was the laughing response.

Amy, too, was laughing silently, as she reined in the horses. "What are you two girls giggling about?" said Burt, becoming a little uncomfortable. "The idea of two such refined creatures giggling!"

"Well," exclaimed Webb, "what am I to do? I can't stand up between you and drive."

"Gertrude, you must clamber around and sustain Burt's drooping spirits."

"Indeed, Amy, you must know best how to do that," was the reply. "As guest, I claim a little of the society of the commander-in-chief. You had it coming over."

"I'll solve the vexed question," said Burt, much nettled, and leaping out.

"Now, Burt, the question isn't vexed, and don't you be," cried Amy, springing lightly over to the next seat. "There are Fred and Alf, too, with the gun. Let us all get home as soon as possible, for it's nearly time for supper already. Come, I shall feel much hurt if you don't keep me company."

Burt at once realized the absurdity of showing pique, although he felt that there was something in the air which he did not understand. He came back laughing, with much apparent good-nature, and saying, "I thought I'd soon bring one or the other of you to terms."

"Oh, what a diplomat you are!" said Amy, with difficulty restraining a new burst of merriment.

They soon reached the summit, and paused to give the horses a breathing. The young moon hung in the west, and its silver crescent symbolized to Miss Hargrove the hope that was growing in her heart. "Amy," she said, "don't you remember the song we arranged from 'The Culprit Fay'? We certainly should sing it here on this mountain. You take the solo."

Amy sang, in clear soprano:

"'The moon looks down on old Cro' Nest,
She mellows the shades on his shaggy breast,
And seems his huge gray form to throw
In a silver cone on the wave below.'"

"Imagine the cone and wave, please," said Miss Hargrove; and then, in an alto rich with her heart's deep feeling, she sang with Amy:

"'Ouphe and goblin! imp and sprite!
Elf of eve! and starry fay!
Ye that love the moon's soft light,
Hither — hither wend your way;
Twine ye in a jocund ring;
Sing and trip it merrily,
Hand to hand and wing to wing,
Round the wild witch-hazel tree.'"

"If I were a goblin, I'd come, for music like that," cried Burt, as they started rapidly homeward.

"You are much too big to suggest a culprit fay," said Amy.

"But the description of the fay's charmer is your portrait," he replied, in a low tone:

"'But well I know her sinless mind
Is pure as the angel forms above,
Gentle and meek, and chaste and kind,
Such as a spirit well might love.'"

"Oh, no; you are mistaken, I'm not meek in the least. Think of the punishment:

"'Tied to the hornet's shardy wings,
Toss'd on the pricks of nettles' stings;'

you know the rest."

"What witchery has got into you to-night, Amy?"

"Do you think I'm a witch? Beware, then. Witches can read men's thoughts."

"That last song was so good that I, for one, would be glad of more," cried Webb.

"You men must help us, then," said Miss Hargrove, and in a moment the wild, dim forest was full of melody, the rocks and highlands sending back soft and unheeded echoes.

Burt, meantime, was occupied with disagreeable reflections. Perhaps both the girls at last understood him, and had been comparing notes, to his infinite disadvantage. His fickleness and the dilemma he was in may have become a jest between them. What could he do? Resentment, except against himself, was impossible. If Amy understood him, in what other way could she meet any approach to sentiment on his part than by a laughing scorn? If Miss Hargrove had divined the past, or had received a hint concerning it, why should she not shun his society? He was half-desperate, and yet felt that any show of embarrassment or anger would only make him appear more ridiculous. The longer he thought the more sure he was that the girls were beginning to guess his position, and that his only course was a polite indifference to both. But this policy promised to lead through a thorny path, and to what? In impotent rage at himself he ground his teeth during the pauses between the stanzas that he was compelled to sing. Such was the discord in his heart that he felt like uttering notes that would make "night hideous."

He was still more distraught when, on their return, they found Mr. Hargrove's carriage in waiting, and Amy, after a brief conference with her friend in her room, came down prepared to accompany Miss Hargrove home after supper. In spite of all his efforts at ease and gayety, his embarrassment and trouble were evident. He had observed Miss Hargrove's pallor and her effort to keep up at Fort Putnam, and could not banish the hope that she sympathized with him; but now the young girl was demurely radiant. Her color had come again, and the lustre of her beautiful eyes was dazzling. Yet they avoided his, and she had far more to say to Webb and the others than to him. Webb, too, was perplexed, for during the day Amy had been as bewildering to him as to Burt. But he was in no uncertainty as to his course, which was simply to wait. He, with Burt, saw the girls to the carriage, and the latter said good-night rather coldly and stiffly. Alf and Fred parted regretfully, with the promise of a correspondence which would be as remarkable for its orthography as for its natural history.

CHAPTER LII.

BURT'S SORE DILEMMA.

MR. HARGROVE greeted Amy cordially, but his questioning eyes rested oftenest on his daughter. Her expression and manner caused him to pace his study long and late that night. Mrs. Hargrove was very polite and a little stately. She felt that she existed on a plane above Amy.

The young girls soon pleaded fatigue, and retired. Once in the seclusion of their room they forgot all about their innocent fib, and there was not a trace of weariness in their manner. While Burt was staring at his dismal, tangled fortune, seeing no solution of his difficulties, a fateful conference relating to him was taking place. Amy did not look like a scorner, as with a sister's love and a woman's tact she pleaded his cause and palliated his course to one incapable of harsh judgment. But she felt that she must be honest with her friend, and that the whole truth would be best and safest. Her conclusion was: "No man who loved *you*, and whom you encouraged, would ever change. I know now that I never had a particle of such feeling as you have for Burt, and can see that I naturally chilled and quenched his regard for me."

Miss Hargrove's dark eyes flashed ominously as she spoke of Burt or of any man proving faithless after she had given encouragement.

"But it wasn't possible for me to give him any real encouragement," Amy persisted. "I've never felt as you do, and am not sure that I want to for a long time."

"How about Webb?" Miss Hargrove almost said, but she suppressed the words, feeling that since he had not revealed his secret she had no right to do so. Indeed, as she recalled how sedulously he had guarded it she was sure he would not thank her for suggesting it to Amy before she was ready for the knowledge. Impetuous as Miss Hargrove was at times, she had too fine a nature to be careless of the rights and feelings of others. Moreover, she felt that Webb had been her ally, whether consciously or not, and he should have his chance with all the help she could give him, but she was wise enough to know that obtrusion and premature aid are often disastrous.

The decision, after this portentous conference, was: "Mr. Burt must seek me, and seek very zealously. I know you well enough, Amy, to be sure that you will give him no hints. It's bad enough to love a man before I've been asked to do so. What an utterly perverse and unmanageable thing one's heart is! I shall do no angling, however, nor shall I permit any."

"You may stand up straight, Gertrude," said Amy, laughing, "but don't lean over backward."

Burt entertained half a dozen wild and half-tragic projects before he fell asleep late that night, but finally, in utter self-disgust, settled down on the prosaic and not irrational one of helping through with the fall work on the farm, and then of seeking some business or profession to which he could give his whole mind. "As to ladies' society," he concluded, savagely, "I'll shun it hereafter till I'm grown up."

Burt always attained a certain kind of peace and the power to sleep after he had reached an irrevocable decision.

During the night the wind veered to the east, and a cold, dismal rain-storm set in. Dull and dreary indeed the day proved to Burt. He could not go out and put his resolution into force. He fumed about the house, restless, yet reticent. He would rather have fought dragons than keep company with his own thoughts in inaction. All the family supposed he missed Amy, except Webb, who hoped he missed some one else.

"Why don't you go over and bring Amy home, Burt?" his mother asked, at the dinner-table. "The house seems empty without her, and everybody is moping. Even father has fretted over his newspaper, and wished Amy was here."

"Why can't they print an edition of the paper for old men and dark days?" said the old gentleman, discontentedly.

"Well," remarked Leonard, leaning back in his chair, and looking humorously at Maggie, "I'm sorry for you young fellows, but I'm finding the day serene."

"Of course you are," snapped Burt. "With an arm-chair to doze in and a dinner to look forward to, what more do you wish? As for Webb, he can always get astride of some scientific hobby, no matter how bad the weather is."

"As for Burt, he can bring Amy home, and then every one will be satisfied," added his mother, smiling.

Thus a new phase of his trial presented itself to poor Burt. He must either face those two girls after their night's conclave, with all its possible revelations, or else awaken at once very embarrassing surmises. Why shouldn't he go for Amy? all would ask. "Well, why shouldn't I?" he thought. "I may as well face it out." And in a mood of mingled recklessness and fear he drove through the storm. When his name was announced the girls smiled significantly, but went down looking as unconscious as if they had not spoken of him in six months, and Burt could not have been more suave, non-committal, and impartially polite if these ladies had been as remote from his thoughts as one of Webb's theories. At the same time he intimated that he would be ready to return when Amy was.

At parting the friends gave each other a little look of dismay, and he caught it from the same telltale mirror that persisted in taking a part in this drama.

"Aha!" thought the young fellow, "so they *have* been exchanging confidences, and my manner is disconcerting — not what was expected. If I have become a jest between them it shall be a short-lived one. Miss Hargrove, with all her city experience, shall find that I'm not so young and verdant but that I can take a hand in this game also. As for Amy, I now know she never cared for me, and I don't believe she ever would;" and so he went away with laughing repartee, and did not see the look of deep disappointment with which he was followed.

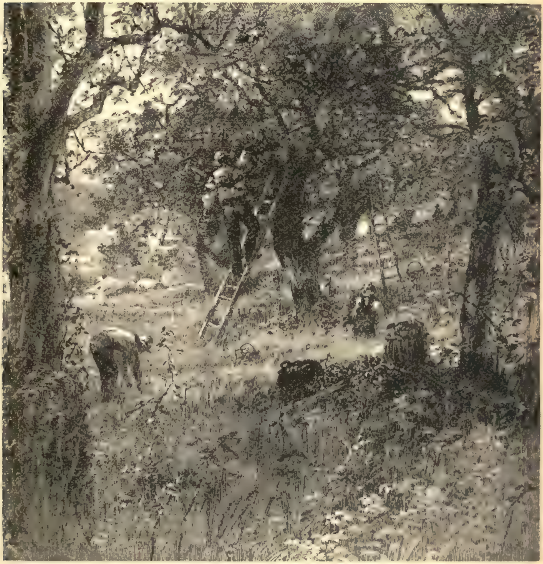
Amy was perplexed and troubled. Her innocent schemes might not be so easily accomplished if Burt would be wrong-headed. She was aware of the dash of recklessness in his character, and feared that under the impulse of pride he might spoil everything, or, at least, cause much needless delay.

With the fatality of blundering which usually attends upon such occasions, he did threaten to fulfil her fears, and so successfully that Amy was in anxiety, and Miss Hargrove grew as pale as she was resolute not to make the least advance, while poor Webb felt that his suspense never would end. Burt treated Amy in an easy, fraternal manner. He engaged actively in the task of gathering and preparing for market the large crop of apples, and he openly broached the subject of going into a business of some kind away from home, where, he declared, with a special meaning for Amy, he was not needed, adding: "It's time I was earning my salt and settling down to something for life. Webb and Len can take care of all the land, and I don't believe I was cut out for a farmer."

He not only troubled Amy exceedingly, but he perplexed all the family, for it seemed that he was decidedly taking a new departure. One evening, a day or two after he had introduced the project of going elsewhere, his father, to Amy's dismay, suggested that he should go to the far West and look after a large tract of land which the old gentleman had bought some years before. It was said that a railroad was to be built through it, and, if so, the value of the property would be greatly enhanced, and steps should be taken to get part of it into the market. Burt took hold of the scheme with eagerness, and was for going as soon as possible. Looking to note the effect of his words upon Amy, he saw that her expression was not only reproachful, but almost severe. Leonard heartily approved of the plan. Webb was silent, and in deep despondency, feeling that if Burt went now nothing would be settled. He saw Amy's aversion to the project also, and misinterpreted it.

She was compelled to admit that the prospects were growing very dark. Burt might soon depart for an indefinite absence, and Miss Hargrove return to the city. Amy, who had looked upon the mutations in her own prospects so quietly, was almost feverishly eager to aid her friend. She feared she had blundered on the mountain ride. Burt's pride had been wounded, and he had received the impression that his April-like moods had been discussed satirically. It was certain that he had been very deeply interested in Gertrude, and that he was throwing away not only his happiness, but also hers; and Amy felt herself in some degree to blame. Therefore she was bent upon ending the senseless misunderstanding, but found insurmountable embarrassments on every side. Miss Hargrove was prouder than Burt. Wild horses could not draw her to the Cliffords'. With a pale, resolute face, she declined even to put herself in the way of receiving the least advance. Amy would gladly have taken counsel of Webb, but could not do so without revealing her friend's secret, and also disclosing mere surmises about Burt, which, although amounting to conviction in her mind, could not be mentioned. Therefore, from the very delicacy of the situation, she felt herself helpless. Nature was her ally, however, and if all that was passing in Burt's mind had been manifest, the ardent little schemer would not have been so despondent.

The best hope of Burt had been that he had checkmated the girls in their disposition to make jesting comparisons. He would retire with so much nonchalance as to leave nothing to be said. They would find complete inaction and silence hard to combat. But the more he thought of it the less it seemed like an honorable retreat. He had openly wooed one girl, he had since lost his heart to another, and she had given him a glimpse of strong regard, if not more. His thoughts were busy with her every word and glance. How much had his tones and eyes revealed to her? Might she not think him a heartless flirt



THE ORCHARD HARVEST.

if he continued to avoid her and went away without a word? Would it not be better to be laughed at as one who did not know his own mind than be despised for deliberate trifling? Amy had asked him to go and spend an evening with her friend, and he had pleaded weariness as an excuse. Her incredulous look and rather cool manner since had not been re-assuring. She had that very morning broached the subject of a chestnutting party for the following day, and he had promptly said that he was going to the city to make inquiries about routes to the West.

"Why, Burt, you can put off your trip to town for a day," said his mother. "If you are to leave us so soon you should make the most of the days that are left."

"That is just what he is doing," Amy remarked, satirically. "He has become absorbed in large business considerations. Those of us who have not such resources are of no consequence."

The old people and Leonard believed that Amy was not pleased with the idea of Burt's going away, but they felt that she was a little unreasonable, since the young fellow was rather to be commended for wishing to take life more seriously. But her words rankled in Burt's mind. He felt that she understood him better than the others, and that he was not winning respect from her. In the afternoon he saw her, with Alf and Johnnie, starting for the chestnut-trees, and although she passed not far away she gave him only a slight greeting, and did not stop for a little merry banter, as usual. The young fellow was becoming very unhappy, and he felt that his position was growing intolerable. That Amy should be cold towards him, or, indeed, towards any one, was an unheard-of thing, and he knew that she must feel that there was good reason for her manner. "And is there not?" he asked himself, bitterly. "What are she and Miss Hargrove thinking about me?"

The more he thought upon the past the more awkward and serious appeared his dilemma, and his long Western journey, which at first he had welcomed as promising a diversion of excitement and change, now began to appear like exile. He dreaded to think of the memories he must take with him; still more he deprecated the thoughts he would leave behind him. His plight made him so desperate that he suddenly left the orchard where he was gathering apples, went to the house, put on his riding-suit, and in a few moments was galloping furiously away on his black horse. With a renewal of hope Webb watched his proceedings, and with many surmises, Amy, from a distant hill-side, saw him passing at a break-neck pace.

CHAPTER LIII.

BURT'S RESOLVE.

FOR the first two or three miles Burt rode as if he were trying to leave care behind him, scarcely heeding what direction he took. When at last he reined his reeking horse he found himself near the entrance of the lane over which willows met in a Gothic arch. He yielded to the impulse to visit the spot which had seen the beginning of so fateful an acquaintance, and had not gone far when a turn in the road revealed a group whose presence almost made his heart stand still for a moment. Miss Hargrove had stopped her horse on the very spot where he had aided her in her awkward predicament. Her back was towards him, and her great dog was at her side, looking up into her face, as if in mute sympathy with his fair mistress.

Hope sprang up in Burt's heart. She could not be there with bowed head if she despised him. Her presence seemed in harmony with that glance by which, when weak and unnerved after escaping from deadly peril, she had revealed possibly more than gratitude to the one who had rescued her. His love rose like an irresistible tide, and he resolved that before he left his home Amy and Miss Hargrove should know the whole truth, whatever might be the result. Meanwhile he was rapidly approaching the young girl, and the dog's short bark of recognition was her first intimation of Burt's presence. Her impulse was to fly, but in a second she saw the absurdity of this course, and yet she was greatly embarrassed, and would rather have been discovered by him at almost any other point of the globe. She was going to the city on the morrow, and as she had drawn rein on this spot and realized the bitterness of her disappointment, tears would come. She wiped them hastily away, but dreaded lest their traces should be seen.

Turning her horse, she met Burt with a smile that her moist eyes belied, and said: "I'm glad you do not find me in such an awkward plight as when we first met here. I've been giving my horse a rest. Do you not want a gallop?" and away like the wind she started homeward.

Burt easily kept at her side, but conversation was impossible. At last he said: "My horse is very tired, Miss Hargrove. At this pace you will soon be home, and I shall feel that you are seeking to escape from me. Have I fallen so very low in your estimation?"

"Why," she exclaimed, in well-feigned surprise, as she checked her horse, "what have you done that you should fall in my estimation?"

"I shall tell you before very long," he said, with an expression that seemed almost tragic.

"Mr. Clifford, you surprise me. Your horse is all of a foam too. Surely this brief gallop cannot have so tried your superb beast. What has happened? Amy is not ill, or any one?"

"Oh, no," he replied, with a grim laugh. "Every one is well and complacent. I had been riding rapidly before I met you. My horse has been idle for some days, and I had to run the spirit out of him. Amy wishes to have a chestnutting party to-morrow. Won't you join us?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Clifford, but I return to the city to-morrow afternoon, and was coming over in the morning to say good-by to Amy and your father and mother."

"I am very sorry too," he said, in tones that gave emphasis to his words.

She turned upon him a swift, questioning glance, but her eyes instantly fell before his intense gaze.

"Oh, well," she said, lightly, "we've had a very pleasant summer, and all things must come to an end, you know." Then she went on speaking, in a matter-of-fact way, of the need of looking after Fred, who was alone in town, and of getting the city house in order, and of her plans for the winter, adding: "As there is a great deal of fruit on the place, papa does not feel that he can leave just yet. You know he goes back and forth often, and so his business does not suffer. But I can just as well go down now, and nearly all my friends have returned to town."

"All your friends, Miss Hargrove?"

"Amy has promised to visit me soon," she said, hastily.

"It would seem that I am not down on your list of friends," he began, gloomily.

"Why, Mr. Clifford, I'm sure papa and I would be glad to have you call whenever you are in town."

"I fear I shall have to disappoint Mr. Hargrove," he said, a little satirically. "I'm going West the last of this month, and may be absent much of the winter. I expect to look about in that section for some opening in business."

"Indeed," she replied, in tones which were meant to convey but little interest, yet which had a slight tremor in spite of her efforts. "It will be a very great change for you."

"Perhaps you think that constitutes its chief charm."

"Mr. Clifford," she said, "what chance have I had to think about it at all? You have never mentioned the matter." (Amy had, however, and Gertrude had not only thought about it, but dreamed of it, as if she had been informed that on a certain date the world would end.) "Is it not a rather sudden plan?" she asked, a little hesitatingly.

"Yes, it is. My father has a large tract of land in the West, and it's time it was looked after. Isn't it natural that I should think of doing something in life? I fear there is an impression in your mind that I entertain few thoughts beyond having a good time."

"To have a good time in life," she said, smiling at him, "is a very serious matter, worthy of any one's attention. It would seem that few accomplish it."

"And I greatly fear that I shall share in the ill-success of the majority."

"You are much mistaken. A man has no end of resources. You will soon be enjoying the excitement of travel and enterprise in the West."

"And you the excitement of society and conquest in the city. Conquests, however, must be almost wearisome to you, Miss Hargrove, you make them so easily."

"You overrate my power. I certainly should soon weary of conquests were I making them. Women are different from men in this respect. Where in history do we read of a man who was satiated with conquest? Well, here we are at home. Won't you come in? Papa will be glad to see you."

"Are you going to the city to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"May I call on you this evening?"

"Certainly. Bring Amy with you, won't you?"

"Will you forgive me if I come alone?"

"I'll try to. I suppose Amy will be tired from nutting."

He did not reply, but lifted his hat gravely, mounted his horse, and galloped away as if he were an aid bearing a message that might avert a battle.

Miss Hargrove hastened to her room, and took off her hat with trembling hands. Burt's pale, resolute face told her that the crisis in her life had come. And yet she did not fully understand him. If he meant to speak, why had he not done so? why had he not asked permission to consult her father?

Mr. Hargrove, from his library window, saw Burt's formal parting, and concluded that his fears or hopes — he scarcely knew which were uppermost, so deep was his love for his daughter, and so painful would it be to see her unhappy — were not to be fulfilled. By a great effort Gertrude appeared not very *distraite* at dinner, nor did she mention Burt, except in a casual manner, in reply to a question from her mother, but her father thought he detected a strong and suppressed excitement.

She excused herself early from the table, and said she must finish packing for her departure.

CHAPTER LIV.

A GENTLE EXORCIST.

BURT'S black horse was again white before he approached his home. In the distance he saw Amy returning, the children running on before, Alf whooping like a small Indian to some playmate who was answering farther away. The gorgeous sunset lighted up the still more brilliant foliage, and made the scene a fairy-land. But Burt had then no more eye for nature than a man would have who had staked his all on the next throw of the dice. Amy was alone, and now was his chance to intercept her before she reached the house. Imagine her surprise as she saw him make his horse leap the intervening fences, and come galloping towards her.

"Burt," she cried, as he, in a moment or two, reined up near her, "you will break your neck!"

"It wouldn't matter much," he said, grimly. "I fear a worse fate than that."

"What do you mean?" she asked, in alarm. "What has happened?"

He threw the bridle over a stake in the fence, and the horse was glad to rest, with drooping head. Then he came and stood beside her, his face flushed, and his mouth twitching with excitement and strong feeling. For a moment he could not speak.

"Burt," she said, "what *is* the matter? What do you fear?"

"I fear your scorn, Amy," he began, impetuously; "I fear I shall lose your respect forever. But I can't go on any longer detesting myself and feeling that you and Miss Hargrove despise me. I may seem to you and her a fickle fool, a man of straw, but you shall both know the truth. I sha'n't go away a coward. I can at least be honest, and then you may think what you please of my weakness and vacillation. You cannot think worse things than I think myself, but you must not imagine that I am a cold-blooded, deliberate trifler, for that has never been true. I know you don't care for me, and never did."

"Indeed, Burt, you are mistaken. I do care for you immensely," said Amy, eagerly clasping his arm with both her hands.

"Amy, Amy," said Burt, in a low, desperate tone, "think how few short months have passed since I told you I loved you, and protested I would wait till I was gray. You have seen me giving my thoughts to another, and in your mind you expect to see me carried away by a half-dozen more. You are mistaken, but it will take a long time to prove it."

"No, Burt, I understand you better than you think. Gertrude has inspired in you a very different feeling from the one you had for me. I think you are loving now with a man's love, and won't get over it very soon, if you ever do. You have seen, you must have felt, that my love for you was only that of a sister, and of course you soon began to feel towards me in the same way. I don't believe I would have married you had you waited an age. Don't fret, I'm not going to break my heart about you."

"I should think not, nor will any one else. Oh, Amy, I so despised myself that I have been half-desperate."

"Despised yourself because you love a girl like Gertrude Hargrove! I never knew a man to do a more natural and sensible thing, whether she gave you encouragement or not. If I were a man I would make love to her, rest assured, and she would have to refuse me more than once to be rid of me."

Burt took a long breath of immense relief. "You are heavenly kind," he said. "Are you sure you won't despise me? I could not bear that. It seems to me that I have done such an awfully mean thing in making love to you in my own home, and then in changing."

Her laugh rang out merrily. "Fate has been too strong for you, and I think — I mean — I hope, it has been kind. Bless you, Burt, I could never get up any such feeling as sways you. I should always be disappointing, and you would have found out, sooner or later, that your best chance would be to discover some one more responsive. Since you have been so frank, I'll be so too. I was scarcely more ready for your words last spring than Johnnie, but I was simple enough to think that in half a dozen years or so we might be married if all thought it was best, and my pride was a little hurt when I saw what — what — well, Gertrude's influence over you. But I've grown much older the last few months, and know now that my thoughts were those of a child. My feeling for you is simply that of a sister, and I don't believe it would ever have changed. Who knows? I might eventually have an acute attack also, and then I should be in a worse predicament than yours."

"But you will be my loving sister as long as you live, Amy? You will believe that I have a little manhood if given a chance to show it?"

"I believe it now, Burt, and I can make you a hundred fold better sister than wife. The idea! It seems but the other day I was playing with dolls. Here, now, cheer up. You have judged yourself too harshly;" and she looked at him so smilingly and affectionately that he took her in his arms and kissed her again and again, exclaiming, "You can count on one brother to the last drop of his blood. Oh, Amy, whatever happens now, I won't lose courage. Miss Hargrove will have to say no a dozen times before she is through with me."

At this moment Webb, from the top of a tall ladder in the orchard, happened to glance that way, and saw the embrace. He instantly descended, threw down his basket of apples, and with it all hope. Burt had won Amy at last. The coolness between them had been but a misunderstanding, which apparently had been banished most decidedly. He mechanically took down his ladder and placed it on the ground, then went to his room to prepare for supper.

"Burt," cried Amy, when they were half-way home, "you have forgotten your horse."

"If he were Pegasus, I should have forgotten him to-day. Won't you wait for me?"

"Oh, yes, I'll do anything for you."

"Will you?" he said, eagerly. "Will you tell me if you think Miss Hargrove —"

"No, I won't tell you anything. The idea! After she has refused you half a dozen times, I may, out of pity, intercede a little. Go get your horse, smooth your brow, and be sensible, or you'll have Webb and Leonard poking fun at you. Suppose they have seen you galloping over fences and ditches like one possessed."

"Well, I was possessed, and never was there such a kind, gentle exorcist. I have seen Miss Hargrove to-day; I had just parted from her."

"Did you say anything?"

"No, Amy. How could I, until I had told you? I felt I was bound to you by all that can bind a man."

"Oh, Burt, suppose I had not released you, but played Shylock, what would you have done?" and her laugh rang out again in intense merriment.

"I have no fears of that," he replied, ruefully. "You are the last one to practise Mrs. MacStinger's tactics. My fear was that you and Miss Hargrove both would send me West as a precious good riddance."

"Well, it was square of you, as Alf says, to come to me first, and I appreciate it, but I should not have resented the omission. Will you forgive my curiosity if I ask what is the next move in the campaign? I've been reading about the war, you know, and I am quite military in my ideas."

"I have Miss Hargrove's permission to call to-night. It wasn't given very cordially, and she asked me to bring you."

"No, I thank you."

"Oh, I told her she would have to forgive me if I came alone. I meant to have it out to-day, if old Chaos came again." When Amy's renewed laughter so subsided that he could speak, he resumed: "I'm going over there after supper, to ask her father for permission to pay my addresses, and if he won't give it, I shall tell him I will pay them all the same — that I shall use every effort in my power to win his daughter. I don't want a dollar of his money, but I'm bound to have the girl if she'll ever listen to me after knowing all you know."

Amy's laugh ceased, and she again clasped her hands on his arm. "Dear Burt," she said, "your course now seems to me manly and straightforward. I saw the strait you were in, but did not think you felt it so keenly. In going West I feared you were about to run away from it. However Gertrude may treat you, you have won my respect by your downright truth. She may do as she pleases, but she can't despise you now. There goes your horse to the stable. He has learned this afternoon that you are in no state of mind to take care of him."

CHAPTER LV.

BURT TELLS HIS LOVE AGAIN.

WEBB appeared at the supper-table the personification of quiet geniality, but Amy thought she had never seen him look so hollow-eyed. The long strain was beginning to tell on him, decidedly, and to-night he felt as if he had received a mortal blow. But with indomitable courage he hid his wound, and seemed absorbed in a conversation with Leonard and his father about the different varieties of apples, and their relative value. Amy saw that his mother was looking at him anxiously, and she did not wonder. He was growing thin even to gauntness.

Burt also was an arrant dissembler, and on rising from the table remarked casually that he was going over to bid Miss Hargrove good-by, as she would return to town on the morrow.

"She'll surely come and see us before she goes," Mrs. Clifford remarked. "It seems to me she hasn't been very sociable of late."

"Certainly," said Amy. "She'll be over in the morning. She told me she was coming to say good-by to us all, and she has asked me to visit her. Come, Webb, you look all tired out to-night. Let me read to you. I'll stumble through the dryest scientific treatise you have if I can see you resting on the sofa."

"That's ever so kind of you, Amy, and I appreciate it more than you imagine, but I'm going out this evening."

"Oh, of course, sisters are of no account. What girl are *you* going to see?"

"No girl whatever. I am too old and dull to entertain the pretty creatures."

"Don't be fishing. You know one you could entertain if she isn't a pretty creature, but then she's only a sister who doesn't know much."

"I'm sorry — I must go," he said, a little abruptly, for her lovely, half-laughing, half-reproachful face, turned to his, contained such mocking promise of happiness that he could not look upon it. What was his urgent business? His rapid steps as he walked mile after mile indicated that the matter was pressing indeed; but, although it was late before he returned, he had spoken to no one. The house was dark and silent except that a light was burning in Burt s room. And his momentous fortunes the reader must now follow.

Miss Hargrove, with a fluttering heart, heard the rapid feet of his horse as he rode up the avenue. Truly, he was coming at a lover's pace. The door-bell rang, she heard him admitted, and expected the maid's tap at her door to follow. Why did it not come? Were the tumultuous throbs of her heart so loud that she could not hear it? What had become of him? She waited and listened in vain. She opened her door slightly; there was no sound. She went to her window. There below, like a shadow, stood a saddled horse. Where was the knight? Had the stupid girl shown him into the drawing-room and left him there? Surely the well-trained servant had never been guilty of such a blunder before. Could it have been some one else who had come to see her father on business? She stole down the stairway in a tremor of apprehension, and strolled into the parlor in the most nonchalant manner imaginable. It was lighted, but empty, and her expression suddenly became one of troubled perplexity. She returned to the hall, and started as if she had seen an apparition. There on the rack hung Burt's hat, as natural as life. Voices reached her ear from her father's study. She took a few swift steps towards it, then fled to her room, and stood panting before her mirror, which reflected a young lady in a costume charmingly ill adapted to "packing."

How swiftly the minutes passed! how eternally long they were! Would she be sent for? *When* would she be sent for? "It was honorable in him to speak to papa first, and papa would not, could not, answer him without consulting me. I cannot be treated as a child any longer," she muttered, with flashing eyes. "Papa loves me," she murmured, in swift alternation of gentle feeling. "He could not make my happiness secondary to a paltry sum of money."

Meanwhile Burt was pleading his cause. Mr. Hargrove had greeted him with no little surprise. The parting of the young people had not promised any such interview.

"Have you spoken to my daughter on this subject?" Mr. Hargrove asked, gravely, after the young fellow had rather incoherently made known his errand.

"No, sir," replied Burt, "I have not secured your permission. At the same time," he added, with an ominous flash in his blue eyes, "sincerity compels me to say that I could not take a final refusal from any lips except those of your daughter, and not readily from hers. I would not give up effort to win her until convinced that any amount of patient endeavor was useless. I should not persecute her, but I would ask her to reconsider an adverse answer as often as she would permit, and I will try with all my soul to render myself more worthy of her."

"In other words," began Mr. Hargrove, severely, "if I should decline this honor, I should count for nothing."

"No, sir, I do not mean that, and I hope I haven't said it, even by implication. Your consent that I should have a fair field in which to do my best would receive from me boundless gratitude. What I mean to say is, that I could not give her up; I should not think it right to do so. This question is vital to me, and I know of no reason," he added, a little haughtily, "why I should be refused a privilege which is considered the right of every gentleman."

"I have not in the slightest degree raised the question of your being a gentleman, Mr. Clifford. Your course in coming to me before revealing your regard to my daughter proves that you are one. But you should realize that you are asking a great deal of me. My child's happiness is my first and only consideration. You know the condition of life to which my daughter has been accustomed. It is right and natural that I should also know something of your prospects, your ability to meet the obligations into which you wish to enter."

Poor Burt flushed painfully, and hesitated. After a moment he answered, with a dignity and an evident sincerity which won golden opinions from Mr. Hargrove: "I shall not try to mislead you in the least on this point. For my own sake I wish that your daughter were far poorer than I am. I can say little more than that I could give her a home now and every comfort of life. I could not now provide for her the luxury to which she has been accustomed. But I am willing to wait and eager to work. In youth and health and a fair degree of education I have some capital in addition to the start in life which my father has promised to his sons. What could not Miss Hargrove inspire a man to do?"

The man of experience smiled in spite of himself at Burt's frank enthusiasm and *naïveté*. The whole affair was so different from anything that he had ever looked forward to! Instead of a few formalities between himself and a wealthy suitor whom his wife, and therefore all the world, would approve of, here he was listening to a farmer's son, with the consciousness that he must yield, and not wholly unwilling to do so. Moreover, this preposterous young man, so far from showing any awe of him, had almost defied him from the start, and had plainly stated that the father's wealth was the only objection to the daughter. Having seen the drift of events, Mr. Hargrove had long since informed himself thoroughly about the Clifford family, and had been made to feel that the one fact of his wealth, which Burt regretted, was almost his only claim to superiority. Burt was as transparent as a mountain brook, and quite as impetuous. The gray-haired man sighed, and felt that he would give all his wealth in exchange for such youth. He knew his daughter's heart, and felt that further parleying was vain, although he foresaw no easy task in reconciling his wife to the match. He was far from being heartbroken himself, however, for there was such a touch of nature in Burt, and in the full, strong love waiting to reward the youth, that his own heart was stirred, and in the depths of his soul he knew that this was better than giving his child to a jaded millionaire. "I have money enough for both," he thought. "As she said, she is rich enough to follow her heart. It's a pity if we can't afford an old-fashioned love-match."

Burt was respectfully impatient under Mr. Hargrove's deep thought and silence.

At last the father arose and gave him his hand, saying: "You have been honest with me, and that, with an old merchant, counts for a great deal. I also perceive you love my daughter for herself. If she should ever inform me that you are essential to her happiness I shall not withhold my consent."

Burt seized his hand with a grasp that made it ache, as he said, "Every power I have, sir, shall be exerted that you may never regret this kindness."

"If you make good that promise, Mr. Clifford, I shall become your friend should your wooing prove successful. If you will come to the parlor I will tell Miss Hargrove that you are here."

He went up the stairs slowly, feeling that he was crossing the threshold of a great change. How many thoughts passed through his mind as he took those few steps! He saw his child a little black-eyed baby in his arms; she was running before him trundling her hoop; she came to him with contracted brow and half-tearful eyes, bringing a knotty sum in fractions, and insisting petulantly that they were very "vulgar" indeed; she hung on his arm, a shy girl of fifteen, blushingly conscious of the admiring eyes that followed her; she stood before him again in her first radiant beauty as a *débutante*, and he had dreamed of the proudest alliance that the city could offer; she looked into his eyes, a pale, earnest woman, and said, "Papa, he saved my life at the risk of his own." True, true, Mr. Clifford had not spoken of that, and Mr. Hargrove had not thought of it in the interview so crowded with considerations. His heart relented towards the youth as it had not done before. Well, well, since it was inevitable, he was glad to be the one who should first bring the tidings of this bold wooer's purpose. "Trurie will never forget this moment," he muttered, as he knocked at her door, "nor my part in her little drama." O love, how it craves even the crumbs that fall from the table of its idol!

"Trurie," he began, as he entered, "you had better dress. Bless me, I thought you were packing!"

"I — I was."

"You were expecting some one?"

"Mr. Clifford said he would call — to bid me good-by, I suppose."

"Was that all you supposed, Trurie?"

"Indeed, papa, I told him I was going to town to-morrow, and he asked if he might call."

"Did he speak of his object?"

"No, papa. I'm sure it's quite natural he should call, and I have been packing."

"Well, I can assure you that he has a very definite object. He has asked me if he might pay his addresses to you, and in the same breath assured me that he would in any event."

"Oh, papa," she said, hiding her face on his shoulder, "he was not so unmannerly as that!"

"Indeed, he went much further, declaring that he would take no refusal from you, either; or, rather, that he would take it so often as to wear out your patience, and secure you by proving that resistance was useless. He had one decided fault to find with you, also. He much regrets that you have wealth."

"Oh, papa, tell me what he did say;" and he felt her heart fluttering against his side like that of a frightened bird.

"Why, Trurie, men have offered you love before."

"But I never loved before, nor knew what it meant," she whispered. "Please don't keep me in suspense. This is all so strange, so sacred to me."

"Well, Trurie, I hope your match may be one of those that are made in heaven. Your mother will think it anything but worldly wise. However, I will reconcile her to it, and I'm glad to be the one with whom you will associate this day. Long after I am gone it may remind you how dear your happiness was to me, and that I was willing to give up my way for yours. Mr. Clifford has been straightforward and manly, if not conventional, and I've told him that if he could win you and would keep his promise to do his best for you and by you, I would be his friend, and that, you know, means much. Of course, it all depends upon whether you accept him. You are not committed in the least."

"Am I not, papa? Here is an organ" — with her hand upon her heart — "that knows better. But I shall not throw myself at him. Must I go down now?"

"Oh, no, I can excuse you," he said, with smiling lips but moist eyes.

"Dear papa, I will, indeed, associate you with this hour and every pleasant thing in life. You will find that you have won me anew instead of losing me;" and looking back at him with her old filial love shining in her eyes, she went slowly away to meet the future under the sweet constraint of Nature's highest law.

If Burt had been impatient in the library, he grew almost desperate in the parlor. Horrible doubts and fears crossed his mind. Might not Miss Hargrove's pride rise in arms against him? Might she not even now be telling her father of his fickleness, and declaring that she would not listen to a "twice-told tale"? Every moment of delay seemed ominous, and many moments passed. The house grew sepulchral in its silence, and the wind without sighed and moaned as if Nature foreboded and pitied him in view of the overwhelming misfortune impending. At last he sprang up and paced the room in his deep perturbation. As he turned towards the entrance he saw framed in the doorway a picture that appeared like a radiant vision. Miss Hargrove stood there, looking at him so intently that, for a second or two, he stood spell-bound. She was dressed in some white, clinging material, and, with her brilliant eyes, appeared in the uncertain light too beautiful and wraith-like to be human. She saw her advantage, and took the initiative instantly. "Mr. Clifford," she exclaimed, "do I seem an apparition?"

"Yes, you do," he replied, coming impetuously towards her. She held out her hand, proposing that their interview should at least begin at arm's length. Nevertheless, the soft fire in his eyes and the flush on his handsome face made her tremble with a delicious apprehension. Even while at a loss to know just how to manage the preliminaries for a decorous yielding, she exulted over the flame-like spirit of her lover.

"Ah, Mr. Clifford," she cried, "you ought to know that you are not crushing a ghost's hand."

"Pardon me. What I meant was that I thought I had seen you before, but you are a new revelation every time I see you."

"I can't interpret visions."

"Please don't say that, for I must ask you to interpret one to-night. What does Shakespeare say about those who have power? I hope you will use yours mercifully. Oh, Miss Hargrove, you are so beautiful that I believe I should lose my reason if you sent me away without hope."

"Mr. Clifford, you are talking wildly," was her faint response.

"I fear I am. I am almost desperate from fear, for I have a terribly hard duty to perform."

"Indeed!" she said, withdrawing her hand, which he relinquished most reluctantly, dreading that he might never receive it again.

"Do not assume that attitude, Miss Hargrove, or I shall lose courage utterly."

"Truly, Mr. Clifford," she said, a little satirically, seating herself on a sofa, "I never imagined you deficient in courage. Is it a terrible duty to entertain me for a half-hour, and say good-by?"

"Yes. Nothing could be worse than that, if that were all;" and he looked at her appealingly and in such perplexed distress that she laughed outright.

"I am very much in earnest, Miss Hargrove."

"You are very enigmatical, Mr. Clifford. Must I be present while you perform this terrible duty?"

"I think you know what I must confess already, and have a world of scorn in store for me. Do not judge me harshly. Whatever the end may be, and my sense of ill-desert is heavy indeed, I shall begin on the basis of absolute truth. You shall know the worst. I've asked your father for the privilege of winning your love;" and then he hesitated, not knowing how to to go on.

"Is that the worst?" she asked, demurely.

"No, I fear it will be the best, for he kindly gave his consent, and I know it would be hard for him to do as much for any man, much more so for one not wholly to his mind. Miss Hargrove, I must appear awkwardness and incoherency personified. I hardly know how to go on. I shall appear to you fickle and unmanly. How can I excuse myself to you when I have no excuse except the downright truth that I love you better than my life, better than my own soul, better than all the world and everything in it. I never knew what love was until you became unconscious in my arms on the mountain. Forgive me for referring to it. I'm only trying to explain myself; and yet I had thought that I knew, and had spoken words of love to your friend, Amy Winfield, who is worthy of the love of the best and noblest man that ever breathed. She did not welcome my words — they only wounded her — and she has never cared for me except as a true and gentle sister cares. But I promised to wait till she did care. I can't keep that promise. You fascinated me from the first hour of our meeting. I feel now that I cherished an unworthy purpose towards you. I thought that, by attentions to you, I could make Amy care; I thought that you were but a brilliant society girl; but every hour I spent with you increased my admiration, my respect; I saw that you were better and stronger than I was. On the first day we went into camp on the mountain I saw whither my heart was leading me, and from that hour until to-day I have tried to conquer my love, feeling that I had no right to give it, that you would despise it if I did. You can't have any confidence in me now. All my hope is that you will give me a chance to prove that I am not a fickle wretch. I will accept of any probation, I will submit to any terms. I can't take an absolute refusal now, for I feel you are seeing me at my worst, and I know that you could do with me anything you pleased."

Her head bowed lower and lower as he poured out these words like a torrent. "Does Amy — have you told her that you cannot keep your promise to her?" she faltered, in a low tone.

"Oh, yes, I told her so a few hours ago — since I met you this afternoon. I was going away to the West, like a coward, to escape from my dilemma, for I felt you would never listen to me after you knew that I had broken my word to Amy. I feared that I had already become a by-word between you for all that was weak and fickle. But after I saw you I could not go till I spoke. I determined to reveal the whole truth, and if you ever gave me a chance to retrieve myself, gratitude would be no name for my deep feeling."

"Did — did Amy release you?"

"Yes, she was kindness itself. She told me in good plain English that she wanted neither me nor my promise; that she didn't think that she ever could have loved me, no matter how long I might have waited. But I could not look into your clear eyes and say, 'I love you,' and know that you might learn from her or any one that I had said this before. If you won't trust me, having had the whole truth, then I must bear my hard fate as best I can."

"How long would you be willing to wait for me?" she asked, in tones so low that he could scarcely catch the words.

He bounded to her side, and took her unresisting hand. "Oh, Gertrude," he pleaded, "prove me, give me a chance, let me show that I am not without manhood and constancy. Believe me, I know the priceless gift I'm asking, but what else can I do? I have tried for weeks to conquer the feeling you have inspired, tried with all the help that pride and sense of duty and honor could give, but it has been utterly useless. I now am free; I have the right to speak. I have concealed nothing from you. I'm wholly at your mercy."

At last she raised her downcast eyes and averted face to his, and for a moment he was dazed at their expression. In tones sweet, low, and deep with her strong emotion, she said, "Burt, how glad I am that you men are blind! I found out that I loved you before we went to our mountain camp." She sprang up and gave him her other hand as she continued: "Can love impose such hard conditions as you suggest,— months of doubtful waiting for one who risked his life for me without a second's hesitation? That is not my nature, Burt. If I have power over you, I shall show it in another way."

She would never forget his look as he listened to these words, nor his humility as he lowered his head upon her shoulder, and murmured, "I am not worthy of this." It touched the deepest and tenderest chord in her heart. His feeling was not the exultation of success, but a gratitude too deep for words, and a half-conscious appeal that she would use her woman's power to evoke a better manhood. It was not mere acknowledgment of her beauty, or the impulse of his passion; it was homage to the best and noblest part of her nature, the expression of his absolute trust. Never had she received such a tribute, and she valued it more than if Burt had laid untold wealth at her feet.

A great joy is often as sobering as a great sorrow, and they talked long and earnestly together. Gertrude would not become engaged until she had told her mother, and shown her the respect that was her due. "You must not be resentful," the young girl said, "if mamma's consent is not easily won. She has set her heart on an establishment in town, I've set my heart on you ; so there we differ, and you must give me time to reconcile her to a different programme."

The clock on the mantel chimed eleven, and Burt started up, aghast at the flight of time. Gertrude stole to her father's library, and found that he was pacing the floor. "I should not have left him alone so long to-night," she thought, with compunction. "Papa," she said, "Mr. Clifford is going. Will you not come and speak to him?"

He looked into his daughter's flushed, happy face, and needed no further explanation, and with her hands on his arm he went to the drawing-room. Burt said but few and very simple words, and the keen judge of men liked him better than if he had been more exuberant. There was evidence of downright earnestness now that seemed a revelation of a new trait.

"You spoke of going to the West soon," Mr. Hargrove remarked, as they lingered in parting. "Have you any objection to telling me of your purpose?"

Burt explained. Mr. Hargrove's face soon expressed unusual interest. "I must talk with you further about this," he said. "I have land in the same locality, and also an interest in the railroad to which you refer. Perhaps I can make your journey of mutual service."

"Oh, papa," cried his daughter, "you are my good genius!" for she well understood what that mutual service meant.

After Burt had gone, Mr. Hargrove said, "Well, well, this Western-land business puts a new aspect on the affair, and mamma may have little ground for complaint. It's my impression that the Cliffords will realize a very respectable fortune out of that land."

"Papa," said the young girl, "Burt gave me something better than wealth to-night — better even than love, in the usual sense of the word. He gave me his faith. He acted as if he saw in me the power to help him to be a true man, and what higher compliment can a woman receive? He did not express it so much by word as by an unconscious manner, that was so sincere and unpremeditated that it thrilled my very soul. "Oh, papa, you have helped me to be so very happy!"

CHAPTER LVI.

WEBB'S FOUR-LEAVED CLOVER.

WEBB'S silent entrance had not been so quiet but that Burt heard him. Scarcely had he gained his room before the younger brother knocked, and followed him in without waiting. "Where have you been at this time of night?" he exclaimed. "You are infringing on ghostly hours, and are beginning to look like a ghost;" for Webb had thrown himself into a chair, and was haggard from the exhaustion of his long conflict. The light and kindly way in which he answered his brother proved that he was victor.

"Webb," said Burt, putting his hand on the elder brother's shoulder, "you saved my life last winter, and life has become of immense value to me. If you had not found me, I should have missed a happiness that falls to the lot of few — a happiness of which all your science can never give you, you old delver, even an idea. I meant to tell mother and father first, but I feel to-night how much I owe to your brave, patient search, and I want your congratulations."

"I think you might have told father and mother last night, for I suppose it's morning now."

"I did not get home in time, and did not wish to excite mother, and spoil her rest."

"Well, then, you might have come earlier or gone later. Oh, I know all about it. I'm not blind."

"By Jove! I think not, if you know all about what I didn't know, and could scarcely believe possible myself, till an hour or two since."

"What on earth are you driving at? I think you might have stayed at home with Amy to-night, of all times. An accident, Burt, revealed to me your success, and I do congratulate you most sincerely. You have now the truest and loveliest girl in the world."

"That's true, but what possible accident could have revealed the fact to you?"

"Don't think I was spying upon you. From the top of a ladder in the orchard I saw, as the result of a casual glance, your reward to Amy for words that must have been very satisfactory."

Burt began to laugh as if he could not control himself. "What a surprise I have for you all!" he said. "I went where I did last night with Amy's full knowledge and consent. She never cared a rap for me, but the only other girl in the world who is her equal does, and her name is Gertrude Hargrove."

Webb gave a great start, and sank into a chair.

"Don't be so taken aback, old fellow. I suppose you and the rest had set your hearts on my marrying Amy. You have only to follow Amy's example, and give me your blessing. Yes, you saw me give Amy a very grateful and affectionate greeting last evening. She's the dearest little sister that ever a man had, and that's all she ever wanted to be to me. I felt infernally mean when I came to her yesterday, for I was in an awkward strait. I had promised to wait for her till she did care, but she told me that there was no use in waiting, and I don't believe there would have been. She would have seen some one in the future who would awaken a very different feeling from any that I could inspire, and then, if she had promised herself to me, she would have been in the same predicament that I was. She is the best and most sensible little girl that ever breathed, and feels towards me just as she does towards you, only she very justly thinks you have forgotten more than I ever knew. As for Gertrude — Hang it all! what's the use of trying to explain?

You'll say I'm at my old tricks, but I'm not. You've seen how circumstances have brought us together, and I tell you my eye and heart are filled now for all time. She will be over to-morrow, and I want her to receive the greeting she deserves."

The affair seemed of such tremendous importance to Burt that he was not in the least surprised that Webb was deeply moved, and fortunately he talked long enough to give his brother time to regain his self-control. Webb did congratulate him in a way that was entirely satisfactory, and then bundled him out of the room in the most summary manner, saying, "Because you are a hare-brained lover, you shouldn't keep sane people awake any longer." It were hard to say, however, who was the less sane that night, Webb or Burt. The former threw open his window, and gazed at the moonlit mountains in long, deep ecstasy. Unlike Burt's, his more intense feeling would find quiet expression. All he knew was that there was a chance for him — that he had the right to put forth the best effort of which he was capable — and he thanked God for that. At the same time he remembered Amy's parable of the rose. He would woo as warily as earnestly. With Burt's experience before his eyes, he would never stun her with sudden and violent declarations. His love, like sunshine, would seek to develop the flower of her love.

He was up and out in the October dawn, too happy and excited for sleep. His weariness was gone; his sinews seemed braced with steel as he strode to a lofty eminence. No hue on the richly tinted leaves nor on the rival chrysanthemums was brighter than his hope, and the cool, pure air, in which there was as yet no frostiness, was like exhilarating wine. From the height he looked down on his home, the loved casket of the more dearly prized jewel. He viewed the broad acres on which he had toiled, remembering with a dull wonder that once he had been satisfied with their material products. Now there was a glamour upon them, and upon all the landscape. The river gleamed and sparkled; the mountains flamed like the plumage of some tropical bird. The world was transfigured. The earth and his old materiality became the foundation-stones on which his awakened mind, kindled and made poetic, should rear an airy, yet enduring, structure of beauty, consecrated to Amy. He had loved nature before, but it had been to him like a palace in which, as a dull serving-man, he had employed himself in caring for its furniture and the frames of its paintings. But he had been touched by a magic wand, and within the frames glowed ever-changing pictures, and the furniture was seen to be the work of divine art. The palace was no longer empty, but enshrined a living presence, a lovely embodiment of Nature's purest and best manifestation. The development of no flower in all the past summer was so clear to him as that of the girl he loved. He felt as if he had known her thoughts from childhood. Her young womanhood was like that of the roses he had shown to her in the dewy June dawn that seemed so long ago. Burt had never touched her heart. It was still like a bud of his favorite mossrose, wrapped in its green calyx. Oh, what a wealth of fragrant beauty would be revealed! Now it might be revealed to him. But she should waken in her own time; and if he had not the power to impart the deep, subtile impulse, then that nearest to her, Nature, should be his bride.

They were all at the breakfast-table when he returned, and this plotter against Amy's peace entered and greeted her with a very quiet "Good-morning," but he laid beside her plate a four-leaved clover which he had espied on his way back.

"Thanks, Webb," she said, with eyes full of merriment; "I foresee an amazing amount of good luck in this little emblem. Indeed, I feel sure that startling proofs of it will occur to-day;" and she looked significantly at Burt, who laughed very consciously.

"What mischief has Burt been up to, Amy?" Mrs. Clifford asked. "He was ready to explode with suppressed something last evening at supper, and now he is effervescing in somewhat different style, but quite as remarkably. You boys needn't think you can hide anything from mother very long; she knows you too well."

Both Webb and Burt, with Amy, began to laugh, and they looked at each other as if there were a good deal that mother did not know.

"Webb and Amy have evidently some joke on Burt," remarked Leonard. "Webb was out last night, and I bet a pippin he caught Burt flirting with Miss Hargrove."

"Oh, Burt!" cried Amy, in mock indignation.

"Nonsense!" said his mother. "Burt is going to settle down now and be steady. We'll make him sign a pledge before he goes West, won't we, Amy?"

"Yes indeed," gasped Amy, almost beside herself with merriment; "he'll have to sign one in big capitals."

"Burt," said his father, looking at him over his spectacles, "you've been getting yourself into some scrape as sure as the world. That's right, Amy; you laugh at him well, and — "

"A truce!" exclaimed Burt. "If I'm in a scrape, I don't propose to get out of it, but rather to make you all share in it. As Amy says, her four-leaved clover will prove a true prophet, green as it looks. I now beg off, and shall prove that my scrape has not spoiled my appetite."

"Well," said Leonard, "I never could find any four-leaved clovers, but I've had good luck, haven't I, Maggie?"

"You had indeed, when you came courting me."

"How about Maggie's luck?" asked Burt.

"I am satisfied," began Webb, "that I could develop acres of four-leaved clover. Some plants have this peculiarity. I have counted twenty-odd on one root. If seed from such a plant were sown, and then seed selected again from the new plants most characterized by this 'sport,' I believe the trait would become fixed, and we could have a field of four-leaved clover. New varieties of fruits, vegetables, and flowers are often thus developed from chance 'sports' or abnormal specimens."

"Just hear Webb," said Amy. "He would turn this ancient symbol of fortune into a marketable commodity."

"Pardon me; I was saying what might be done, not what I proposed to do. I found this emblem of good chance by chance, and I picked it with the 'wish' attached to the stem. Thus to the utmost I have honored the superstition, and you have only to make your wish to carry it out fully."

"My wishes are in vain, and all the four-leaved clovers in the world wouldn't help them. I wish I was a scientific problem, a crop that required great skill to develop, a rare rose that all the rose-maniacs were after, a new theory that required a great deal of consideration and investigation, and accompanied with experiments that needed much observation, and any number of other t-i-o-n-shuns. Then I shouldn't be left alone evenings by the great inquiring mind of the family. Burt's going away, and, as his father says, has got into a scrape; so what's to become of me?"

They all arose from the table amid general laughter, of which Webb and Burt were equally the objects, and on the faces of those not in the secret there was much perplexed curiosity.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Maggie, "if Webb should concentrate his mind on you as you suggest, it would end by his falling in love with you."

This speech was received with shouts of merriment, and Amy felt the color rushing into her face, but she scouted the possibility. "The idea of Webb's falling in love with any one!" she cried. "I should as soon expect to see old Storm King toppling over."

"Still waters run —" began Maggie, but a sudden flash from Webb's eyes checked her.

"Deep, do they?" retorted Amy. "Some still waters don't run at all. Not for the world would I have Webb incur the dreadful risk that you suggest."

"I think I'm almost old enough to take care of myself, sister Amy, and I promise you to try to be as entertaining as such an old fellow can be. As to falling in love with you, that happened long ago — the first evening you came, when you stood in the doorway blushing and frightened at the crowd of your new relations."

"Haven't I got over being afraid of them remarkably? I never was a bit afraid of you even at first. It took me a long time, however, to find out how learned you were, and what deep subjects are required to interest you. Alas, I shall never be a deep subject."

"Well, my dear," said Mr. Clifford, putting his arm around her, "you have come like sunshine into the old home, and we old people can't help wishing you may never go out of it while we are alive."

"I'm not a bit jealous, Amy," said Maggie.

"I think it's time this mutual admiration society broke up," the young girl said, with tears trembling in her eyes. "When I think of it all, and what a home I've found, I'm just silly enough to cry. I think it's time, Burt, that you obtained your father's and mother's forgiveness or blessing, or whatever it is to be."

"You are right, Amy, as you always are. Mother, will you take my arm? and if you will accompany us, sir (to his father), you shall learn the meaning of Amy's four-leaved clover."

"You needn't think you are going to get Amy without my consent," Leonard called after him. "I've known her longer than any of you — ever since she was a little girl at the depot."

Amy and Webb began laughing so heartily at the speaker that he went away remarking that he could pick apples if he couldn't solve riddles.

"Come up to my room, Amy," said Maggie, excitedly.

"No, no, Mother Eve, I shall go to my own room, and dress for company."

"Oh, I guess your secret!" cried Maggie. "Burt said something more than good-by to Miss Hargrove last evening."

Amy would not answer, and the sound of a mirthful snatch of song died musically away in the distance.

"Now, Mr. Webb," Maggie resumed, "what did *you* mean by that ominous flash from your cavern-like eyes?"

"It meant that Amy has probably been satisfied with one lover in the family and its unexpected result. I don't wish our relations embarrassed by the feeling that she must be on her guard against another."

"Oh, I see, you don't wish her to be on her guard."

"Dear Maggie, whatever you may see, appear blind. Heaven only knows what you women don't see."

"That's good policy, Webb. I'll be your ally now. I've suspected you for some time, but thought Burt and Amy were committed to each other."

"Amy does not suspect anything, and she must not. She is not ready for the knowledge, and may never be. All the help I ask is to keep her unconscious. I've been expecting you would find me out, for you married ladies have had an experience which doubles your insight, and I'm glad of the chance to caution you. Amy is happy in loving me as a brother. She shall never be unhappy in this home if I can prevent it."

Maggie entered heart and soul into Webb's cause, for he was a great favorite with her. He was kind to her children, and in a quiet way taught them almost as much as they learned at school. He went to his work with mind much relieved, for she and his mother were the only ones that he feared might surmise his feeling, and by manner or remark reveal it to Amy, thus destroying their unembarrassed relations, and perhaps his chance to win the girl's heart.

CHAPTER LVII.

OCTOBER HUES AND HARVESTS.

BURT'S interview with his parents, their mingled surprise, pleasure, and disappointment, and their deep sympathy, need not be dwelt upon. Mr. Clifford was desirous of first seeing Amy, and satisfying himself that she did not in the slightest degree feel herself slighted or treated in bad faith, but his wife, with her low laugh, said: "Rest assured, father, Burt is right. He has won nothing more from Amy than sisterly love, though I had hoped that he might in time. After all, perhaps it is best. We shall keep Amy, and gain a new daughter that we have already learned to admire and love."

Burt's mind was too full of the one great theme to remember what Mr. Hargrove had said about the Western land, and when at last Miss Hargrove came to say good-by, with a blushing consciousness quite unlike her usual self-possession, he was enchanted anew, and so were all the household. The old people's reception seemed like a benediction; Amy banished the faintest trace of doubt by her mirthful ecstasies; and after their mountain experience there was no ice to break between Gertrude and Maggie.

The former was persuaded to defer her trip to New York until the morrow, and so Amy would have her nutting expedition after all. When Leonard came down to dinner, Burt took Gertrude's hand, and said, "Now, Len, this is your only chance to give your consent. You can't have any dinner till you do."

His swift, deprecating look at Amy's laughing face re-assured him. "Well," he said, slowly, as if trying to comprehend it all, "I do believe I'm growing old. My eyesight must be failing sadly. When *did* all this take place?"

"Your eyesight is not to blame, Leonard," said his wife, with much superiority. "It's because you are only a man."

"That's all I ever pretended to be." Then, with a dignity that almost surprised Gertrude, he, as eldest brother, welcomed her in simple, heartfelt words.

At the dinner-table Miss Hargrove referred to the Western land. Burt laid down his knife and fork, and exclaimed, "I declare, I forgot all about it!"

Miss Hargrove laughed heartily as she said, "A high tribute to me!" and then made known her father's statement that the Clifford tract in the West adjoined his own, that it would soon be very valuable, and that he was interested in the railroad approaching it. "I left him," she concluded, "pouring over his maps, and he told me to say to you, sir" (to Mr. Clifford), "that he wished to see you soon."

"How about the four-leaved clover now?" cried Amy.

In the afternoon they started for the chestnut-trees. Webb carried a light ladder, and both he and Burt had dressed themselves in close-fitting flannel suits for climbing. The orchard, as they passed through it, presented a beautiful autumn picture. Great heaps of yellow and red cheeked apples were upon the ground; other varieties were in barrels, some headed up and ready for market, while Mr. Clifford was giving the final cooperage to other barrels as fast as they were filled.

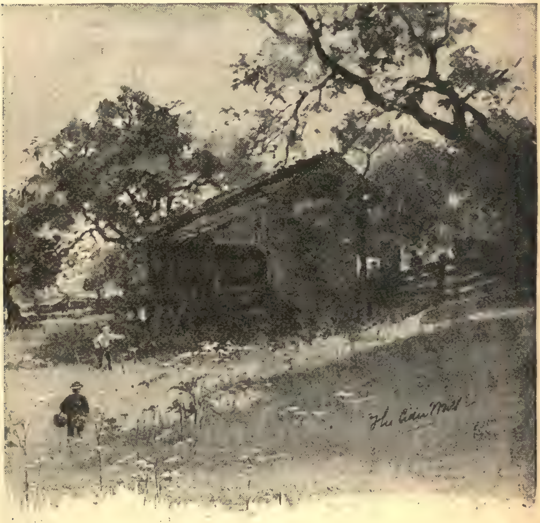
"Father can still head up a barrel better than any of us," Leonard remarked to Miss Hargrove.

"Well, my dear," said the old gentleman, "I've had over half a century's experience."

"It's time I obtained some idea of rural affairs," said Gertrude to Webb. "There seem to be many different kinds of apples here. Can you easily tell them apart?"

"Yes, as easily as you know different dress fabrics at Arnold's.

Those umbrella-shaped trees are Rhode Island greenings; those that are rather long and slender branching are yellow bell-flowers; and those with short and stubby branches and twigs are the old-fashioned dominies. Over there are Newtown pippins. Don't you see how green the fruit is? It will not be in perfection till next March. Not only a summer, but an autumn and a winter are required to perfect that superb apple, but then it becomes one of Nature's triumphs. Some of those heaps on the ground will furnish cider and vinegar. Nuts, cider, and a wood fire are among the privations of a farmer's life."



THE CIDER-MILL.

"Farming, as you carry it on, appears to me a fine art. How very full some of the trees are ! and others look as if they had been half picked over."

"That is just what has been done. The largest and ripest apples are taken off first, and the rest of the fruit improves wonderfully in two or three weeks. By this course we greatly increase both the quality and the bulk of the crop."

"You are very happy in your calling, Webb. How strange it seems for me to be addressing you as Webb !"

"It does not seem so strange to me ; nor does it seem strange that I am talking to you in this way. I soon recognized that you were one of those fortunate beings in whom city life had not quenched nature."

They had fallen a little behind the others, and were out of ear-shot.

"I think," she said, hesitatingly and shyly, "that I had an ally in you all along."

He laughed and replied, "At one time I was very dubious over my expedition to Fort Putnam."

"I imagine that in suggesting that expedition you put in two words for yourself."

"Call it even," he said.

"I wish you might be as happy as I am. I'm not blind either, and I wonder that Amy is so unconscious."

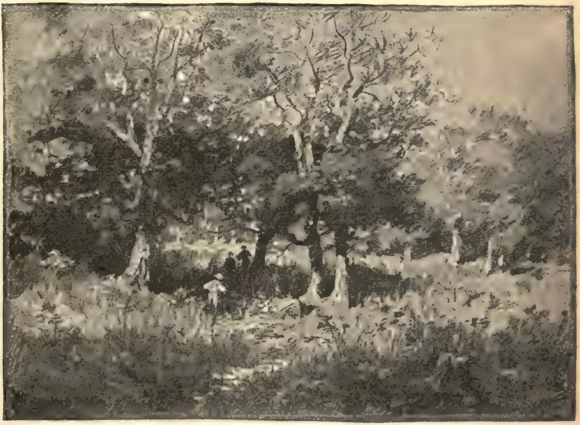
"I hope she will remain so until she awakens as naturally as from sleep. She has never had a brother, and as such I try to act towards her. My one thought is her happiness, and, perhaps, I can secure it in no other way. I feared long since that you had guessed my secret, and am grateful that you have not suggested it to Amy. Few would have shown so much delicacy and consideration."

"I'm not sure that you are right, Webb. If Amy knew of your feeling, it would influence her powerfully. She misjudges you now."

"Yes, it was necessary that she should misunderstand me, and think of me as absorbed in things remote from her life.

The knowledge you suggest might make her very sad, for there never was a gentler-hearted girl. You have remarkable tact. Please use it to prevent the constraint which might arise between us."

Burt now joined them with much pretended jealousy, and they soon reached the trees, which, under the young men's vigorous blows, rained down the prickly burrs, downy chestnuts, and golden leaves. Blue jays screamed indignantly from the mountain-side, and squirrels barked their protest at the inroads made upon their winter stores. As the night approached the air grew chilly, and Webb remarked that frost was coming at last. He hastened home before the others to cover up certain plants that might be sheltered through the first cold snap. The tenderer ones had long since been taken up and prepared for winter blooming.



AN OCTOBER OUTING.

To Amy's inquiry where Johnnie was, Maggie had replied that she had gone nutting by previous engagement with Mr. Alvord, and as the party returned in the glowing evening they met the oddly assorted friends with their baskets well filled. In the eyes of the recluse there was a gentler expression, proving that Johnnie's and Nature's ministry had not been wholly in vain. He glanced swiftly from Burt to Miss Hargrove, then at Amy, and a faint suggestion of a smile hovered about his mouth. He was about to leave them abruptly when Johnnie interposed, pleading: "Mr. Alvord, don't go home till I pick you some of your favorite heart's-ease, as you call my pansies. They have grown to be as large and beautiful as they were last spring. Do you know, in the hot weather they were almost as small as johnny-jumpers? but I wouldn't let 'em be called by that name."

"They will ever be heart's-ease to me, Johnnie — doubly so when you give them," and he followed her to the garden.

In the evening a great pitcher of cider fresh from the press, flanked by dishes of golden fall pippins and grapes, was placed on the table. The young people roasted chestnuts on hickory coals, and every one, even to the invalid, seemed to glow with a kindred warmth and happiness. The city belle contrasted the true home-atmosphere with the grand air of a city house, and thanked God for her choice. At an early hour she said good-by for a brief time and departed with Burt. He was greeted with stately courtesy by Mrs. Hargrove herself, whom her husband and the prospective value of the Western land had reconciled to the momentous event. Burt and Gertrude were formally engaged, and he declared his intention of accompanying her to the city to procure the significant diamond.

After the culminating scenes of Burt's little drama, life went on very serenely and quietly at the Clifford home. Out of school hours Alf, Johnnie, and Ned vied with the squirrels in gathering their hoard of various nuts. The boughs in the orchard grew lighter daily. Frost came as Webb had pre dicted, and dahlias, salvias, and other flowers, that had flamed and glowed till almost the middle of October, turned black in one morning's sun. The butternut-trees had lost their foliage, and countless leaves were fluttering down in every breeze like many-hued gems. The richer bronzed colors of the oak were predominating in the landscape, and only the apple, cherry, and willow trees about the house kept up the green suggestion of summer.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE MOONLIGHT OMEN.

WEBB permitted no marked change in his manner. He toiled steadily with Leonard in gathering the fall produce and in preparing for winter, but Amy noticed that his old pre-occupied look was passing away. Daily he appeared to grow more genial and to have more time and thought for her. With increasing wonder she learned the richness and fulness of his mind. In the evenings he read aloud to them all with his strong, musical intonation, in which the author's thought was emphasized so clearly that it seemed to have double the force that it possessed when she read the same words herself. He found time for occasional rambles and horseback excursions, and was so companionable during long rainy days that they seemed to her the brightest of the week. Maggie smiled to herself and saw that Webb's spell was working. He was making himself so quietly and unobtrusively essential to Amy that she would find half of her life gone if she were separated from him.

Gertrude returned for a short time, and then went to the city for the winter. Burt's orbit was hard to calculate. He was much in New York, and often with Mr. Hargrove, from whom he was receiving instructions in regard to his Western expedition. That gentleman's opinion of Burt's business capacity grew more favorable daily, for the young fellow now proposed to show that he meant to take life in earnest. "If this lasts he will make a trusty young lieutenant," the merchant thought, "and I can make his fortune while furthering mine." Burt had plenty of brains and good executive ability to carry out the wiser counsels of others, while his easy, vivacious manner won him friends and acceptance everywhere.

It was arranged, after his departure, that Amy should visit her friend in the city, and Webb looked forward to her absence with dread and self-depreciation, fearing that he should suffer by contrast with the brilliant men of society, and that the quiet country life would seem dull, indeed, thereafter.

Before Amy went on this visit there came an Indian summer morning in November, that by its soft, dreamy beauty wooed every one out of doors. "Amy," said Webb, after dinner, "suppose we drive over to West Point and return by moonlight." She was delighted with the idea, and they were soon slowly ascending the mountain. He felt that this was his special opportunity, not to break her trustful unconsciousness, but to reveal his power to interest her and make impressions that should be enduring. He exerted every faculty to please, recalling poetic and legendary allusions connected with the trees, plants, and scenes by which they were passing.

"Oh, Webb, how you idealize nature!" she said. "You make every object suggest something fanciful, beautiful, or entertaining. How have you learned to do it?"

"As I told you last Easter Sunday — how long ago it seems! — if I have any power for such idealization it is largely through your influence. My knowledge was much like the trees as they then appeared. I was prepared for better things, but the time for them had not yet come. I had studied the material world in a material sort of way, employing my mind with facts that were like the bare branches and twigs. You awakened in me a sense of the beautiful side of nature. How can I explain it? Who can explain the rapid development of foliage and flowers when all is ready?"

"But, Webb, you appeared, during the summer, to go back to your old materiality worse than ever. You made me feel that

I had no power to do anything for you. You treated me as if I were your very little sister who would have to go to school a few years before I could be your companion."

"Those were busy days," he replied, laughing. "Besides," he added, hesitatingly, "Burt was at one time inclined to be jealous. Of course, it was very absurd in him, but I suppose lovers are always a little absurd."

"I should think it was absurd. I saw whither Burt was drifting long ago — at the time of the great flood which swept away things of more value than my silly expectations. What an unsophisticated little goose I was! I suppose Johnnie expects to be married some day, and in much the same way I looked forward to woman's fate; and since you all seemed to wish that it should be Burt, I thought, 'Why not?' Wasn't it lucky for Burt, and, indeed, for all of you, that I was not a grown-up and sentimental young woman? Mr. Hargrove, by uniting his interests with yours in the West, will make your fortunes, and Burt will bring you a lovely sister. It pleases me to see how Gertrude is learning to like you. I used to be provoked with her at first, because she didn't appreciate you. Do you know, I think you ought to write? You could make people fall in love with nature. Americans don't care half as much for out-door life and pursuits as the English. It seems to me that city life cannot compare with that of the country."

"You may think differently after you have been a few weeks in Gertrude's elegant home."

They had paused again on the brow of Cro' Nest, and were looking out on the wide landscape. "No, Webb," she said; "her home, no doubt, is elegant, but it is artificial. This is simple and grand, and to-day, seen through the soft haze, is lovely to me beyond all words. I honestly half regret that I am going to town. Of course, I shall enjoy myself — I always do with Gertrude — but the last few quiet weeks have been so happy and satisfying that I dread any change."

"Think of the awful vacuum that your absence will make in the old home!"

"Well, I'm a little glad; I want to be missed. But I shall write to you and tell you of all the frivolous things we are doing. Besides, you must come to see me as often as you can."

"I certainly shall."

They saw evening parade, the moon rising meanwhile over Sugarloaf Mountain, and filling the early twilight with a soft radiance. The music seemed enchanting, for their hearts were attuned to it. As the long line of cadets shifted their guns from "carry arms" to "shoulder arms" with instantaneous action, Webb said that the muskets sent out a shivering sound like that of a tree almost ready to fall under the last blows of an axe.

Webb felt that should he exist millions of ages he should never forget the ride homeward. The moon looked through the haze like a veiled beauty, and in its softened light Amy's pure, sweet profile was endowed with ethereal beauty. The beech-trees, with their bleached leaves still clinging to them, were almost spectral, and the oaks in their bronzed foliage stood like black giants by the roadside. There were suggestive vistas of light and shadow that were full of mystery, making it easy to believe that on a night like this the mountain was haunted by creatures as strange as the fancy could shape. The girl at his side was a mystery. Viewless walls incased her spirit. What were her hidden and innermost thoughts? The supreme gift of a boundless love overflowed his heart to his very lips. She was so near, and the spell of her loveliness so strong, that at times he felt that he must give it expression, but he ever restrained himself. His words might bring pain and consternation to the peaceful face. She was alone with him, and there would be no escape should he speak now. No; he had resolved to wait till her heart awoke by its own impulses, and he would keep his purpose even through the witchery of that moonlight drive. "How strangely isolated we are," he thought, "that such feeling as mine can fill my very soul with its immense desire, and she not be aware of anything but my quiet, fraternal manner!"

As they were descending the home slope of the mountain they witnessed a rare and beautiful sight. A few light clouds had gathered around the moon, and these at last opened in a rift. The rays of light through the misty atmosphere created the perfect colors of a rainbow, and this phenomenon took the remarkable form of a shield, its base resting upon one cloud, and its point extending into a little opening in the cloud above.

"Oh, what a perfect shield!" cried Amy. "Was there ever anything so strange and lovely?"

Webb checked his horse, and they looked at the vision with wonder. "I never saw anything to equal that," said Webb.

"Is it an omen, Webb?" she asked, turning a little from him that she might look upward, and leaning on his shoulder with the unconsciousness of a child.

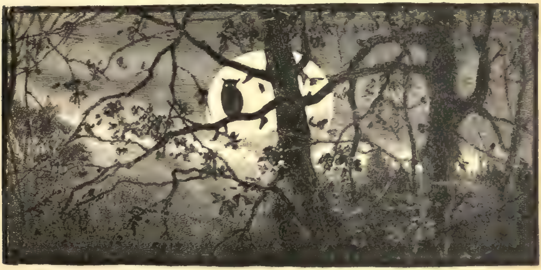
"Let us make it one, dear sister Amy," he said, drawing her nearer to him. "Let it remind you, as you recall it, that as far as I can I will ever shield you from every evil of life." As he spoke the rainbow colors became wonderfully distinct, and then faded slowly away. Her head drooped lower on his shoulder, and she said, dreamily:

"It seems to me that I never was so happy before in my life as I am now. You are so different, and can be so much to me, now that your old absurd constraint is gone. Oh, Webb, you used to make me so unhappy! You made me feel that you had found me out — how little I knew, and that it was a bore to have to talk with me and explain. I know I'm not highly educated. How could I be? I went everywhere with papa, and he always appeared to think of me as a little girl. And then during the last year or two of his life he was so ill that I did not do much else than watch over him with fear and trembling, and try to nurse him and beguile the hours that were so full of pain and weakness. But I'm not contented to be ignorant, and you can teach me so much. I fairly thrill with excitement and feeling sometimes when you are reading a fine or beautiful thing. If I can feel that way I can't be stupid, can I?"

"No, Amy."

"Think how much faster I could learn this winter if you would direct my reading, and explain what is obscure!"

"I will very gladly do anything you wish. You underrate yourself, Amy. You have woman's highest charm. There is a stupidity of heart which is far worse than that of the mind, a selfish callousness in regard to others and their rights and feelings, which mars the beauty of some women worse than physical deformity. From the day you entered our home as a stranger, graceful tact, sincerity, and the impulse of ministry have characterized your life. Can you imagine that mere cleverness, trained mental acuteness, and a knowledge of facts can take the place of these traits? No man can love unless he imagines that a woman has these qualities, and bitter will be his disappointment if he finds them wanting."



"WOO WHOO!"

Her laugh rang out musically on the still air. "Hear the old bachelor talk!" she cried. "I believe you have constructed an ideally perfect creature out of nature, and that you hold trysts with her on moonlight nights, you go out to walk so often alone. Well, well, I won't be jealous of such a sister-in-law, but I want to keep you a little while longer before you follow Burt's example."

"I shall never give you a sister-in-law, Amy."

"You don't know what you'll do. How sure Burt was of himself!"

"Burt and I are different."

"Yes, Webb, you are. If you ever love, it will be for always; and I don't like to think of it. I'd like to keep you just as you are. Now that you see how selfish I am, where is woman's highest charm?"

Webb laughed, and urged his horse into a sharp trot. "I am unchangeable in my opinions too, as far as you are concerned," he remarked. "She is not ready yet," was his silent thought.

When she came down to the late supper her eyes were shining with happiness, and Maggie thought the decisive hour had come; but in answer to a question about the drive, Amy said, "I couldn't have believed that so much enjoyment was to be had in one afternoon. Webb is a brother worth having, and I'm sorry I'm going to New York."

"Am I not a brother worth having?" Leonard asked.

"Oh, you are excellent, as far as you go, but you are so wrapped up in Maggie that you are not of much account; and as for Burt, he is more over head and ears than you are. Even if a woman was in love, I should think she would like a man to be sensible."

"Pshaw, Amy! you don't know what you are talking about," said Maggie.

"Probably not. I suppose it is a kind of disease, and that all are more or less out of their heads."

"We've been out of our heads a good many years, mother, haven't we?" said Mr. Clifford, laughing.

"Well," said Leonard, "I just hope Amy will catch the disease, and have it very bad some day."

"Thank you. When I do, I'll send for Dr. Marvin."

A few days later Webb took her to New York, and left her with her friend. "Don't be persuaded into staying very long," he found opportunity to say, in a low tone.

"Indeed I won't; I'm homesick already;" and she looked after him very wistfully. But she was mistaken. Gertrude looked so hurt and disappointed when she spoke of returning, and had planned so much, that days lengthened into weeks.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE ROSE REVEALS ITS HEART.

WEBB returned to a region that was haunted. Wherever he went, a presence was there before him. In every room, on the lawn, in the garden, in lanes no longer shaded, but carpeted with brown, rustling leaves, on mountain roads, he saw Amy with almost the vividness of actual vision, as he had seen her in these places from the time of her first coming. At church he created her form in her accustomed seat, and his worship was a little confused. She had asked him to write, and he made home life and the varying aspects of nature real to her. His letters, however, were so impersonal that she could read the greater part of them to Gertrude, who had resolved to be pleased out of good-will to Webb, and with the intention of aiding his cause. But she soon found herself expressing genuine wonder and delight at their simple, vigorous diction, their subtile humor, and the fine poetic images they often suggested. "Oh, Amy," she said, "I couldn't have believed it. I don't think he himself is aware of his power of expression."

"He has read and observed so much," Amy replied, "that he has much to express."

"It's more than that," said Gertrude; "there are touches here and there which mere knowledge can't account for. They have a delicacy and beauty which seem the result of woman's influence, and I believe it is yours. I should think you would be proud of him."

"I am," she answered, with exultation and heightened color, "but it seems absurd to suppose that such a little ignoramus as I am can help him much."

Meanwhile, to all appearance, Webb maintained the even tenor of his way. He had been so long schooled in patience that he waited and hoped on in silence as before, and busied himself incessantly. The last of the corn was husked, and the golden treasure stored. The stalks were stacked near the barn for winter use, and all the labors of the year were rounded out and completed. Twice he went to the city to see Amy, and on one of these occasions he was a guest at a large party given in her honor. During much of the evening he was dazzled by her beauty, and dazed by her surroundings. Her father had had her instructed carefully in dancing, and she and Burt had often waltzed together, but he could scarcely believe his eyes as she appeared on the floor unsurpassed in beauty and grace, her favor sought by all. Was that the simple girl who on the shaggy sides of Storm King had leaned against his shoulder?

Miss Hargrove gave him little time for such musings. She, as hostess, often took his arm and made him useful. The ladies found him reserved rather than shy, but he was not long among the more mature and thoughtful men present before a knot gathered around him, and some of Mr. Hargrove's more intimate friends ventured to say, "There seems to be plenty of brains in the family into which your daughter is to enter."

After an hour or two had passed, and Amy had not had a chance to speak to him, he began to look so disconsolate that she came and whispered, "What's the matter, old fellow?"

"Oh, Amy," he replied, discontentedly, "I wish we were back on Storm King. I'm out of place here."

"So do I," she said, "and so we will be many a time again. But you are not out of place here. I heard one lady remarking how 'reserved and *distingué*' you were, and another," she added, with a flash of her ever-ready mirthfulness, "said you were 'deliciously homely.' I was just delighted with that compliment," and she flitted away to join her partner in the dance.

Webb brightened up amazingly after this, and before he departed in the "wee sma' hours," when the rooms were empty, Gertrude gave him a chance for a brief, quiet talk, which proved that Amy's heart was still in the Highlands, even if he did not yet possess it.

Burt would not return till late in December; but Amy came home about the middle of the month, and received an ovation that was enough "to turn any one's head," she declared. Their old quiet life was resumed, and Webb watched keenly for any discontent with it. Her tranquil satisfaction was undoubted. "I've had my little fling," she said, "and I suppose it was time I saw more of the world and society, but oh, what a refuge and haven of rest the old place is! Gertrude is lovely, her father very gallant and polite, but Mrs. Hargrove's stateliness oppresses me, and in society I felt that I had to take a grain of salt with everything said to me. Gertrude showed her sense in preferring a home. I was in some superb houses in the city that did not seem like homes."

Webb, in his solicitude that the country-house should not appear dull, found time to go out with her on pleasant days, and to interest her deeply in a course of reading. It was a season of leisure; but his mother began to smile to herself as she saw how absorbed he was in his pupil.

The nights grew colder, the stars gained a frosty glitter, the ground was rock-like, and the ponds were covered with a glare of black ice. Amy was eager to learn to skate, and Webb found his duty of instructor delightful. Little danger of her falling, although, with a beginner's awkwardness, she essayed to do so often; strong arms were ever near and ready, and any one would have been glad to catch Amy in such peril.

They were now looking forward to Burt's return and the holiday season, which Gertrude would spend with them. Mystery lurked behind every door. Not merely the shops, but busy and stealthy fingers, would furnish the gifts. Webb had bought his present for Amy, but had also burned the midnight oil in the preparation of another — a paper for a magazine, and it had been accepted. He had planned and composed it while at work stripping the husks from the yellow corn, superintending the wood teams and the choppers in the mountain, and aiding in cutting from an adjacent pond the crystal blocks of ice — the stored coolness for the coming summer. Then while others thought him sleeping he wrote and rewrote the thoughts he had harvested during the day.

One of his most delightful tasks, however, was in aiding Amy to embower the old house in wreaths and festoons of evergreens. The rooms grew into aromatic bowers. Autumn leaves and ferns gave to the heavier decorations a light, airy beauty which he had never seen before. Grace itself Amy appeared as she mounted the step-ladder and reached here and there, twining and coaxing everything into harmony.

What was the effect of all this companionship on her mind? She least of all could have answered: she did not analyze. Each day was full and joyous. She was being carried forward on a shining tide of happiness, and yet its motion was so even, quiet, and strong that there was nothing to disturb her maidenly serenity. If Webb had been any one but Webb, and if she had been in the habit of regarding all men as possible admirers, she would have understood herself long before this. If she had been brought up with brothers in her own home she would have known that she welcomed this quiet brother with a gladness that had a deeper root than sisterly affection. But the fact that he was Webb, the quiet, self-controlled man who had called her sister Amy for a year, made his presence, his deep sympathy with her and for her, seem natural. His approaches had been so gradual that he was stealing into her heart as spring enters a flower. You can never name the first hour of its presence; you take no note of the imperceptible yet steady development. The process is quiet, yet vital and sure, and at last there comes an hour when the bud is ready to open. That time was near, and Webb hoped that it was. His tones were now and then so tender and gentle that she looked at him a little wonderingly, but his manner was quiet and far removed from that of the impetuous Burt. There was a warmth in it, however, like the increasing power of the sun, and in human hearts bleak December can be the spring-time as truly as May.

It was the twenty-third — one of the stormiest days of a stormy month. The snow-flakes were whirling without, and making many a circle in the gale before joining their innumerable comrades that whitened the ground. The wind sighed and soughed about the old house as it had done a year before, but Webb and Amy were armed against its mournfulness. They were in the parlor, on whose wide hearth glowed an ample fire. Burt and Gertrude were expected on the evening train.

"Gertie is coming home through the snow just as I did," said Amy, fastening a spray of mistletoe that a friend had sent her from England to the chandelier; "and the same old warm welcome awaits her."

"What a marvellous year it has been!" Webb remarked.

"It has, indeed. Just think of it! Burt is engaged to one of whose existence he did not know a year ago. He has been out West, and found that you have land that will make you all rich."

"Are these the greatest marvels of the year, Amy?"

"No, there is a greater one. I didn't know you a year ago to-day, and now I seem to have known you always, you great patient, homely old fellow — 'deliciously homely.' I shall never get over that."

"The eyes of scores of young fellows looked at you that evening as if you were deliciously handsome."

"And you looked at me one time as if you hadn't a friend in the world, and you wanted to be back in your native wilds."

"Not without you, Amy; and you said you wished you were looking at the rainbow shield with me again."

"Oh, I didn't say all that; and then I saw you needed heartening up a little."

"I did indeed. You were dancing with a terrible swell, worth, it was said, half a million, who was devouring you with his eyes."

"I'm all here, thank you, and you look as if you were doing some devouring yourself. What makes you look at me so? Is there anything on my face?"

"Yes, some color, but it's just as Nature arranged it, and you know Nature's best work always fascinates me."

"What a gallant you are becoming! There, don't you think that is arranged well?" and she stood beneath the mistletoe looking up critically at it.

"Let me see if it is," and he advanced to her side. "This is the only test," he said, and quick as a flash he encircled her with his arm and pressed a kiss upon her lips.

She sprang aloof and looked at him with dilating eyes. He had often kissed her before, and she had thought nothing more of it than of a brother's salute. Was it a subtile, mysterious power in the mistletoe itself with which it had been endowed by ages of superstition? Was that kiss like the final ray of the June sun that opens the heart of the rose when at last it is ready to expand? She looked at him wonderingly, tremblingly, the color of the rose mounting higher and higher, and deepening as if the blood were coming from the depths of her heart. He did not speak. In answer to her wondering, questioning look, he only bent full upon her his dark eyes that had held hers once before in a moment of terror. She saw his secret in their depths at last, the devotion, the love, which she herself had unsuspectingly said would "last always." She took a faltering step towards him, then covered her burning face with her hands.

"Amy," he said, taking her gently in his arms, "do you understand me now? Dear, blind little girl, I have been worshipping all these months, and you have not known it."

"I — I thought you were in love with nature," she whispered.

"So I am, and you are nature in its sweetest and highest embodiment. Every beautiful thing in nature has long suggested you to me. Amy, I *can* wait. You shall have your girlhood. It seems to me now that I have loved you almost from the first hour I saw you. I have known that I loved you ever since that June evening when you left me in the rose garden. Have I not proved that I can be patient and wait?"

She only pressed her burning face closer upon his shoulder. "It's all growing clear now," she again whispered. "How blind I've been! I thought you were only my brother."

"I can be 'only your brother,' if you so wish," he said, gravely. "Your happiness is my first thought."

She looked up at him shyly, tears in her eyes, and a smile hovering about her tremulous lips. "I don't think I understood myself any better than I did you. I never had a brother, and — and — I don't believe I love you just right for a brother;" and her face was hidden again.

His eyes went up to heaven, as if he meant that his mating should be recognized there. Then gently stroking her brown hair, he asked, "Then I sha'n't have to wait, Amy?"

"Am I keeping you waiting, Webb?" she faltered from her deep seclusion.

"Oh, that blessed mistletoe!" cried Webb, lifting the dewy, flower-like face and kissing it again and again. "You are my Christmas gift, Amy."

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I didn't know," began Mr. Clifford from the doorway, and was about to make a hasty and excited retreat.

"Stay, father!" cried Webb. "A year ago you received this dear girl as your daughter. She has consented to make the tie closer still if possible."

The old gentleman took Amy in his arms for a moment, and then said, "This is too good to keep to myself for a moment," and he hastened the blushing, laughing girl to his wife, and exclaimed, "See what I've brought you for a Christmas present. See what that sly, silent Webb has been up to. He has been making love to our Amy right under our noses, and we didn't know it."

"*You* didn't know it, father; mother's eyes are not so blind. Amy, darling, I've been hoping and praying for this. You have made a good choice, my dear, if it is his mother that says it. Webb will never change, and he will always be as gentle and good to you as he has been to me."

"Well, well, well," said Mr. Clifford, "our cup *is* running over, sure enough. Maggie, come here," he called, as he heard her step in the hall. "Here is a new relative. I once felt a little like grumbling because we hadn't a daughter, and now I have three, and the best and prettiest in the land. *You* didn't know what Webb was about."

"Didn't I, Webb — as long ago as last October, too?"

"Oh, Webb, you ought to have told me first," said Amy, reproachfully, when they were alone.

"I did not tell Maggie; she saw," Webb answered. Then, taking a rosebud which she had been wearing, he pushed open the petals with his finger, and asked, "who told me that 'this is no way for a flower to bloom'? I've watched and waited till your heart was ready, Amy." And so the time flew in mutual confidences, and the past grew clear when illumined by love.

"Poor old Webb!" said Amy, with a mingled sigh and laugh. "There you were growing as gaunt as a scarecrow, and I loving you all the time. What a little goose I was! If you had looked at Gertrude as Burt did I should have found myself out long ago. Why hadn't you the sense to employ Burt's tactics?"

"Because I had resolved that nature should be my sole ally. Was not my kiss under the mistletoe a better way of awakening my sleeping beauty than a stab of jealousy?"

"Yes, Webb, dear, patient Webb. The rainbow shield was a true omen, and I am sheltered indeed."

CHAPTER LX.

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS AND SHADOWS.

LEONARD had long since gone to the depot, and now the chimes of his returning bells announced that Burt and Gertrude were near. To them both it was in truth a coming home. Gertrude rushed in, followed by the exultant Burt, her brilliant eyes and tropical beauty rendered tenfold more effective by the wintry twilight without; and she received a welcome that accorded with her nature. She was hardly in Amy's room, which she was to share, before she looked in eager scrutiny at her friend. "What's in the air?" she asked. "What has transfigured Webb? Oh, you little wild-flower, you've found out that he is saying his prayers to you at last, have you? Evidently he hasn't said them in vain. You are very happy, dear?"

"Yes, happier than you are."

"I deny that point-blank. Oh, Amy darling, I was true to you and didn't lose Burt either."

Maggie had provided a feast, and Leonard beamed on the table and on every one, when something in Webb and Amy's manner caught his attention. "This occasion," he began, "reminds me of a somewhat similar one a year ago to-morrow night. It is my good fortune to bring lovely women into this household. My first and best effort was made when I brought Maggie. Then I picked up a little girl at the depot, and she grew into a tall, lovely creature on the way home, didn't she, Johnnie? And now to-night I've brought in a princess from the snow, and one of these days poor Webb will be captured by a female of the MacStinger type, for he will never muster up courage enough — What on earth are you all laughing about?"

"Thank you," said Amy, looking like a peony.

"You had better put your head under Maggie's wing and subside," Webb added. Then, putting his arm about Amy, he asked, "Is this a female of the MacStinger type?"

WINTER TWILIGHT.

Leonard stared in blank amazement. "Well," said he, at last, "when *did* this happen? I give up now. The times have changed. When I was courting, the whole neighborhood was talking about it, and knew I was accepted long before I did. Did you see all this going on, Maggie?"

"Certainly," she answered.

"Now, I don't believe Amy saw it herself," cried Leonard, half desperately, and laughter broke out anew.

"Oh, Amy, I'm so glad!" said Burt, and he gave her the counterpart of the embrace that had turned the bright October evening black to Webb.

"To think that Webb should have got such a prize!" ejaculated Leonard. "Well, well, the boys in this family are in luck."

"It will be my turn next," cried Johnnie.

"No, sir; I'm the oldest," Alf protested.

"Let's have supper," Ned remarked, removing his thumb from his mouth.

"Score one for Ned," said Burt. "There is at least one member of the family whose head is not turned by all these marvellous events."

Can the sunshine and fragrance of a June day be photographed? No more can the light and gladness of that long, happy evening be portrayed. Mrs. Clifford held Gertrude's hand as she had Amy's when receiving her as a daughter. The beautiful girl, whose unmistakable metropolitan air was blended with gentle womanly grace, had a strong fascination for the invalid. She kindled the imagination of the recluse, and gave her a glimpse into a world she had never known.

"Webb," said Amy, as they were parting for the night, "I can see a sad, pale orphan girl clad in mourning. I can see you kissing her for the first time. Don't you remember? I had a strange little thrill at heart then, and you said, 'Come to me, Amy, when you are in trouble.' There is one thing that troubles me to-night. All whom I so dearly love know of my happiness but papa. I wish he knew."

"Tell it to him, Amy," he answered, gently, "and tell it to God."

There were bustle and renewed mystery on the following day. Astonishing-looking packages were smuggled from one room to another. Ned created a succession of panics, and at last the ubiquitous and garrulous little urchin had to be tied into a chair. Johnnie and Alf were in the seventh heaven of anticipation, and when Webb brought Amy a check for fifty dollars, and told her that it was the proceeds of his first crop from his brains, and that she must spend the money, she went into Mr. Clifford's room waving it as if it were a trophy such as no knight had ever brought to his lady-love.

"Of course, I'll spend it," she cried. "I know just how to spend it. It shall go into books that we can read together. What's that agricultural jargon of yours, Webb, about returning as much as possible to the soil? We'll return this to the soil," she said, kissing his forehead, "although I think it is too rich for me already."

In the afternoon she and Webb, with a sleigh well laden, drove into the mountains on a visit to Lumley. He had repaired the rough, rocky lane leading through the wood to what was no longer a wretched hovel. The inmates had been expecting this visit, and Lumley rushed bareheaded out-of-doors the moment he heard the bells. Although he had swept a path from his door again and again, the high wind would almost instantly drift in the snow. Poor Lumley had never heard of Sir Walter Raleigh or Queen Elizabeth, but he had given his homage to a better queen, and with loyal impulse he instantly threw off his coat, and laid it on the snow, that Amy might walk dry-shod into the single room that formed his home. She and Webb smiled significantly at each other, and then the young girl put her hand into that of the mountaineer as he helped her from the sleigh, and said "Merry Christmas!" with a smile that brought tears into the eyes of the grateful man.

"Yer making no empty wish, Miss Amy. I never thought sich a Christmas 'ud ever come to me or mine. But come in, come in out of the cold wind, an' see how you've changed everything. Go in with her, Mr. Webb, an' I'll tie an' blanket your hoss. Lord, to think that sich a May blossom 'ud go into my hut!"

They entered, and Mrs. Lumley, neatly clad in some dark woollen material, made a queer, old-fashioned courtesy that her husband had had her practice for the occasion. But the baby, now grown into a plump, healthy child, greeted her benefactress with nature's own grace, crowing, laughing, and calling, "Pitty lady; nice lady," with exuberant welcome. The inmates did not now depend for precarious warmth upon two logs, reaching across a dirty floor and pushed together, but a neat box, painted green, was filled with billets of wood. The carpeted floor was scrupulously clean, and so was the bright new furniture. A few evergreen wreaths hung on the walls with the pictures that Amy had given, and on the mantel was her photograph — poor Lumley's patron saint.

Webb brought in his armful of gifts, and Amy took the child on her lap and opened a volume of dear old "Mother Goose," profusely illustrated in colored prints — that classic that appeals alike to the hearts of children, whether in mountain hovels or city palaces. The man looked on as if dazed. "Mr. Webb," he said, in his loud whisper, "I once saw a picter of the Virgin and child. Oh, golly, how she favors it!"

"Mrs. Lumley," Amy began, "I think your housekeeping does you much credit. I've not seen a neater room anywhere."

"Well, mum, my 'ole man's turned over a new leaf sure nuff. There's no livin' with him unless everythink is jes so, an' I guess it's better so, too. Ef I let things git slack, he gits mighty savage."

"You must try to be patient, Mr. Lumley. You've made great changes for the better, but you must remember that old ways can't be broken up in a moment."

"Lor' bless yer, Miss Amy, there's nothink like breakin' off short, there's nothink like turnin' the corner sharp, and fightin' the devil tooth and nail. It's an awful tussle at first, an' I thought I was goin' to knuckle under more'n once. So I would ef it hadn't 'a ben fer you, but you give me this little han', Miss Amy, an' looked at me as if I wa'n't a beast, an' it's ben a liftin' me up ever sence. Oh, I've had good folks talk at me an' lecter, an' I've ben in jail, but it all on'y made me mad. The best on 'em wouldn't 'a teched me no more than they would a rattler, sich as we killed on the mountain. But you guv me yer han', Miss Amy, an' thar's mine on it agin; I'm goin' to be a *man*."

She took the great horny palm in both her hands. "You make me very happy," she said, simply, looking at him above the head of his child, "and I'm sure your wife is going to help you. I shall enjoy the holidays far more for this visit. You've told us good news, and we've got good news for you and your wife. Tell him, Webb."

"Yes, Lumley," said Webb, clapping the man on the shoulder, "famous news. This little girl has been helping me just as much as she has you, and she has promised to help me through life. One of these days we shall have a home of our own, and you shall have a cottage near it, and the little girl here that you've named Amy shall go to school and have a better chance than you and your wife have had."

"Oh, goshwalader!" exclaimed the man, almost breaking out into a hornpipe. "The Lord on'y knows what will happen ef things once git a goin' right! Mr. Webb, thar's my han' agin'. Ef yer'd gone ter heaven fer her, yer couldn't 'a got sich a gell. Well, well, give me a chance on yer place, an' I'll work fer yer all the time, even nights an' Sundays."

It was hard for them to get away. The child dropped her books and toys, and clung to Amy. "She knows yer; she knows all about yer," said the delighted father. "Well, ef yer must go, yer'll take suthin' with us;" and from a great pitcher of milk he filled several goblets, and they all drank to the health of little Amy. "Yer'll fin' half-dozen pa'triges under the seat, Miss Amy," he said, as they drove away. "I was bound I'd have some kind of a present fer yer."

She waved her hand back to him, and saw him standing bareheaded in the cutting wind, looking after her.

"Poor old Lumley was right," said Webb, drawing her to him; "I do feel as if I had received my little girl from heaven. We will give those people a chance, and try to turn the law of heredity in the right direction."

In the twilight of that evening, Mr. Alvord sat over his lonely hearth, his face buried in his hands. The day had been terribly long and torturing; memory had presented, like mocking spectres, his past and what it might have been. A sense of loneliness, a horror of great darkness, overwhelmed him. Nature had grown cold and forbidding, and was losing its power to solace. Johnnie, absorbed in her Christmas preparations, had not been to see him for a long time. He had gone to inquire after her on the previous evening, and through the lighted windows of the Clifford home had seen a picture that had made his own abode appear desolate indeed. In despairing bitterness he had turned away, feeling that that happy home was no more a place for him than was heaven. He had wandered out into the storm for hours, like a lost spirit, and at last had returned and slept in utter exhaustion. On the morning preceding Christmas memory awoke with him, and as night approached he was sinking into sullen, dreary apathy.

There was a light tap at the door, but he did not hear it. A child's face peered in at his window, and Johnnie saw him cowering over his dying fire. She had grown accustomed to his moods, and had learned to be fearless, for she had banished his evil spells before. Therefore she entered softly, laid down her bundles, and stood beside him.

"Mr. Alvord!" she said, laying her hand on his shoulder. He started up, and at the same moment a flickering blaze rose on the hearth, and revealed the sunny-haired child standing beside him. If an angel had come, the effect could not have been greater. Like all who are morbid, he was largely under the dominion of imagination; and Johnnie, with her fearless, gentle, commiserating eyes, had for him the potency of a supernatural visitor. But the healthful, unconscious child had a better power. Her words and touch brought saneness as well as hope.

"Why, Mr. Alvord," she cried, "were you asleep? See! your fire is going out, and your lamp is not lighted, and there is nothing ready for your supper. What a queer man you are, for one who is so kind! Mamma said I might come and spend a little of Christmas-eve with you, and bring my gifts, and then that you would bring me home. I know how to fix up your fire and light your lamp. Then we'll get supper together. Won't that be fun?" and she bustled around, the embodiment of beautiful life.

"Oh, Johnnie!" he said, taking her sweet face in his hands, and looking into her clear eyes, "Heaven must have sent you. I was so lonely and sad that I wished I had never lived."

"Why, Mr. Alvord! and on Christmas-eve, too? See what I've brought you," and she opened a book with the angels' song of "peace and good-will" illustrated. "Mamma says that whoever believes that ought to be happy," said the child. "Don't you believe it?"

"Yes, it's true for those who are like you and your mother."

She leaned against him, and looked over his shoulder at the pictures. "Mr. Alvord, mamma said the song was for you, too. Of course, mamma's right. What else did He come for but to help people who are in trouble? I read stories about Him every Sunday to mamma, and He was always helping people who were in trouble, and who had done wrong. That's why we are always glad on Christmas. You look at the book while I set your table."

He did look at it till his eyes were blinded with tears, and like a sweet refrain came the words, "A little child shall lead them."

Half an hour later Leonard, with a kindly impulse, thought he would go to take by the hand Johnnie's strange friend, and see how the little girl was getting on. The scene within, as he passed the window, checked his steps. Johnnie sat at the foot of Mr. Alvord's table, pouring tea for him, chattering meanwhile with a child's freedom, and the hermit was looking at her with such a smile on his haggard face as Leonard had never seen there. He walked quietly home, deferring his call till the morrow, feeling that Johnnie's spell must not be broken.

An hour later Mr. Alvord put Johnnie down at her home, for he had insisted on carrying her through the snow, and for the first time kissed her, as he said,

"Good-by. You, to-night, have been like one of the angels that brought the tidings of 'peace and good-will.'"

"I'm sorry for him, mamma!" said the little girl, after telling her story, "for he's very lonely, and he's such a queer, nice man. Isn't it funny that he should be so old, and yet not know why we keep Christmas?"

Amy sang again the Christmas hymn that her own father and the father who had adopted her had loved so many years before. "My daughter," said Mr. Clifford, as he was fondly bidding her good-night, "how sweetly you have fulfilled the hopes you raised one year ago!"

Mrs. Clifford had gone to her room, leaning on the arm of Gertrude. As the invalid kissed her in parting, she said:

"You have beautiful eyes, my dear, and they have seen far more of the world than mine, but, thank God, they are clear and true. Keep them so, my child, that I may welcome you again to a better home than this."

Once more "the old house stood silent and dark in the pallid landscape." The winds were hushed, as if the peace within had been breathed into the very heart of Nature, and she, too, could rest in her wintry sleep. The moon was obscured by a veil of clouds, and the outlines of the trees were faint upon the snow. A shadowy form drew near; a man paused, and looked upon the dwelling. "If the angels' song could be heard anywhere to-night, it should be over that home," Mr. Alvord murmured; but, even to his morbid fancy, the deep silence of the night remained unbroken. He returned to his home, and sat down in the firelight. A golden-haired child again leaned upon his shoulder, and asked, "What else did He come for but to help people who are in trouble, and who have done wrong?" He started up. Was it a voice deep in his own soul that was longing to escape from evil? or was it a harmony far away in the sky, that whispered of peace at last? That message from heaven is clearest where the need is greatest.

Mr. Hargrove's home was almost a palace, but its stately rooms were desolate on Christmas-eve. He wandered restlessly through their magnificence. He paid no heed to the costly furniture and costlier works of art. "Trurie was right," he muttered. "What power have these things to satisfy when the supreme need of the heart is unsatisfied? It seems as if I could not sleep to-night without seeing her. There is no use in disguising the truth that I'm losing her. Even on Christmas-eve she is absent. It's late, and since I cannot see her, I'll see her gift;" and he went to her room, where she had told him to look for her remembrance. To his surprise, he found that, according to her secret instructions, it was lighted. He entered the dainty apartment, and saw the glow of autumn leaves and the airy grace of ferns around the pictures and windows. He started, for he almost saw herself, so true was the life-size and life-like portrait that smiled upon him. Beneath it were the words, "Merry Christmas, papa! You have not lost me; you have only made me happy."

The moon is again rising over old Storm King; the crystals that cover the white fields and meadows are beginning to flash in its rays; the great pine by the Clifford home is sighing and moaning. What heavy secret has the old tree that it can sigh with such a group near as is now gathered beneath it? Burt's black horse rears high as he reins him in, that Gertrude may spring into the cutter, then speeds away like a shadow through the moonlight. Webb's steed is strong and quiet, like himself, and as tireless. Amy steps to Webb's side, feeling it to be her place in very truth. Sable Abram draws up next, with the great family sleigh, and in a moment Alf is perched beside him. Then Leonard half smothers Johnnie and Ned under the robes, and Maggie, about to pick her way through the snow, finds herself taken up in strong arms, like one of the children, and is with them. The chime of bells dies away in the distance. Wedding-bells will be their echo.

The merry Christmas-day has passed. Dr. and Mrs. Marvin, the Rev. Mr. and Mrs. Barkdale, and other friends have come and gone with their greetings; the old people are left alone beside their cheery fire.

"Here we are, mother, all by ourselves, just as we were once before on Christmas night, when you were as fair and blooming as Amy or Gertrude. Well, my dear, the long journey seems short to-night. I suppose the reason is that you have been such good company."

"Dear old father, the journey would have been long and weary indeed, had I not had your strong arm to lean upon, and a love that didn't fade with my roses. There is only one short journey before us now, father, and then we shall know fully the meaning of the 'good tidings of great joy' forever."

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